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REVOLUTIONARY
REPRISE of the
Blue Rose
Princess



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Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess Vol.1

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AOBARAHIME NO YARINAOSHI KAKUMEIKI Vol.1 by Roku Kaname

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Original Japanese edition published in Japan by SHUFU TO SEIKATSU SHA CO.,LTD.

English translation ©2023 Cross Infinite World

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Digital Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-044-6

Print Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-048-4





1. Prologue (The Poisonous Rose of Ruin)

THE citizens of the Kingdom of Heilland overcrowded the roads of Egdiel, the royal capital, that night. Strangely enough, it was the night of the Star Festival, an event held to celebrate the day the first king established Heilland with the blessing of a guardian star. Usually, people would be headed to the Eram River that courses through Egdiel, lanterns in hand, to set them afloat on the water.

Instead, the people wielded hoes and axes, their expressions distorted with hate like demons. Eyes seething with rage and mouths twisted with loathing, they screamed and shouted as they marched through the streets.

“Kill them!!”

“Kill those Erdalian dogs!!”

“Kill the ones who have dishonored Heilland’s pride!!”

Smoke billowed throughout the royal capital. It drifted through the deep blue night sky, floating by the fluttering flags of Heilland. A massive crowd formed in front of the magnificent Egdiel Castle, which towered over the royal capital.



ALICIA Chester Jorum, a descendant of the House of Chester, which had ruled Heilland since its founding, and wife of the current King Fritz, fled down the corridor with her attendants.

With shining sky-blue hair that captured the tones of a sunny spring sky, eyes of the same blue, white skin like silk, and unparalleled beauty, the people had adored her and given her the name Blue Rose Princess. However, even the beauty of the Blue Rose Princess was no longer enough to appease the population.

“Queen Alicia, the mobs haven’t reached the route ahead yet.”

“There is a waterway coming up. If Your Majesty wishes, we can clear a path for you there.”

“I know, I know.”

Compared to the panicked attendants hurrying their queen to safety, Alicia's actions seemed slow. Her gaze swept over them, her beautiful eyes impatient, though her mind was elsewhere.

“Is His Majesty... Is King Fritz safe?” she asked. “I don't see him. He hasn't fallen into the hands of the mob, has he?”

“Your Majesty!”

Frustration tinged her attendant's voice, but Alicia missed it. Her mind was too filled with worry for her beloved husband, who had not been seen since the riots began.

Alicia was still in danger herself. The waves of riots that started just as the sun had sunk beneath the city had already surged their way to the castle gates. Her attendants had said that the mob included not just civilians but young nobles and knights of the Imperial Guard as well. It was only a matter of time before the mob overwhelmed the castle.

One attendant, noticing the worry in Alicia's eyes, explained patiently, “There is no time. Your Majesty, you are the last living blood descendant of the illustrious House of Chester. Who will rule Heilland if we lose our Queen? Please, let us endure and make haste for now.”

“What are you saying?!” Alicia snapped. “King Fritz will rule Heilland. I will not forgive anyone who disrespects him.”

The attendant had spoken the truth, but it had the opposite effect on Alicia, spurring her to head in the other direction.

“I'm going to save His Majesty. Only follow if you have the same resolve.” Her ringing declaration was answered by none, but their eyes said more than their lips. Alicia scanned her attendants, then she sighed and turned on her heel. “Fine. Go ahead and clear the way. That is an order. I'll bring His Majesty back with me.”

Alicia dashed alone down the maze of corridors, her long hair shining in the light. Swords clanged in the distance, almost rhythmically, but her path remained clear.

She knew many of her people harbored ill will toward King Fritz, the eldest son of Empress Elizabeth and the ruling monarch of the neighboring Erdal Empire and heir to the throne of Erdal.

As countries sharing a border, Erdal and Heilland had fought many wars against each other. Her marriage to Fritz came about after Heilland's previous monarch, King James, was felled by an arrow fired by an Erdalian soldier during the latest war. Many considered their union an act of dominion by a victorious nation against their fallen enemy.

Despite the grudge her people held against Fritz's homeland for the death of her father, Alicia still loved him. From the moment they'd met at the royal court ball, he had stolen her heart.

Even though King Fritz's own heart had never belonged to her.

She dashed through numerous spacious halls and finally spotted her beloved's back. Her body trembled with joy and relief, and she cried out with everything she had. "Your Majesty!! My King!!"

He was standing in the middle of the Hall of Time—a corridor full of Heilland's history, lined with statues of past great kings and saints. Hearing Alicia's call, he turned. His face, framed by soft, wavy gold hair, was so gorgeous it could be mistaken for that of an angel from the legends, yet the sight of it caused Alicia's smile to freeze.

"Alicia..." he hesitantly said her name.

"Your Majesty..." Alicia paused. "...Lady Charlotte."

Amidst the countless pillars, the handsome king's arms were still wrapped around his lover as his eyes wavered with uneasiness. Alicia's heart constricted as Fritz tried to hide his favorite mistress from her view, as if protecting her.

If Alicia had to pick one word to describe the girl in the king's embrace, it would be "lovely." While she couldn't compete with Alicia's own dazzling beauty, her large round eyes were filled with naïveté, and her signature red hair caught the eyes of many admirers.

Alicia had long ago known of their affair, but witnessing it with her own eyes was overwhelming. Charlotte Yggdrasil was the sole keeper of King Fritz's heart.

“There they are!! In the Hall of Time!”

A voice from behind Alicia broke the trance that held them both. Countless footsteps echoed across the stone floor, reminding them that they didn’t have much time left. Stifling the urge to run, Alicia motioned to the king which way to go.

“Please hurry, Your Majesty. Head towards the waterway,” she instructed. “My attendants should be waiting for you there.”

“But what about y—”

“Hurry!!”

Cut off by Alicia, King Fritz seemed to want to say more, but after a moment, he schooled his expression and nodded, having made up his mind about something. Then he wrapped an arm around Charlotte. The girl snuck an anxious glance at Alicia through the red bangs obscuring her face, then they dashed down the statue-lined hallway.

Alicia watched her beloved husband and his mistress escape, fully prepared to die. Even before they were out of sight, the sound of metal on metal reverberated behind her as a group of about ten armored men rushed into the Hall of Time.

Despite some of them wearing the uniform of the Imperial Guard, it was clear from their faces that they hadn’t rushed here to protect their king. Judging by the angry scowl on the face of the leader at the center of the group, they must have spotted King Fritz and Charlotte fleeing down the corridor.

“Still bringing more shame to your name at this time, King Fritz?!”

“You are not to pass!!”

Alicia’s slender limbs trembled as countless swords and glares turned towards her. Despite that, she maintained her royal dignity, with her chin lifted resolutely and her arm raised to block the way forward.

The same courtliness was reflected in the members of the mob. While it would have been easy to force their way past the lone Alicia with their swords, they did not do so.

“Queen Alicia.” The man in the center of the group took several deep breaths, as if quelling his rage before he lost control. Then he stepped forward.

Despite the dire circumstances, Alicia was surprised by the man’s beauty. If this were a resplendent royal court ball instead of a violent revolution, he would have caught the eye of many young noble ladies.

While Alicia’s hair was the color of a sunny sky, his resembled the cloak of night. His almond eyes were a rare deep violet, adding to his mysterious aura. His straight nose and thin lips were masculine, and while the clothes on his tall, slim frame were nothing extravagant, it was easy to tell that he was part of the nobility from his graceful demeanor.

A man with such an appearance should have stood out, yet Alicia didn’t know him. His glossy hair was jet-black, a rare color only members of an old, once-glorious noble family possessed, or so Alicia once heard. She wondered if this man was descended from that family.

However, the man’s handsome features were sullied by violent rage and absolute loathing. But, with great difficulty, he addressed Alicia, a descendant of true royalty, with proper language.

“Please let us pass, Queen Alicia. We seek your forgiveness for pointing our swords at your esteemed person, the symbol of Heilland’s royalty.”

“In that case, you should sheathe your swords.” Alicia glared at her attractive assailant, her body frozen. The man’s grip on the hilt of his sword tightened.

“With all due respect, why is Your Majesty protecting King Fritz? He is the enemy of our late king, and as if ruling over Heilland with tyranny is not enough, he has now made a mockery of Your Majesty by taking a mistress. That man has trampled on our pride too many times.”

“So what?!” Her clear voice soared through the stone hallway like a flying bird. Rousing herself up, Alicia continued, her tone cold and dignified. “If I am the symbol of Heilland to the people, then King Fritz is the person whom I, as that symbol, love. If you claim to be loyal to the Chester heritage, shouldn’t you be using those swords to protect your king?!”

“...Has our kingdom’s pride fallen so low?” the man spat bitterly, all pretense

gone from his expression as his violet gaze turned cold.

This is bad.

Filled with instinctive terror, Alicia attempted to back away, but the man moved first. Something struck Alicia through the chest, and her eyes widened. When her swaying vision dropped, she saw the man's sword sticking out of her breast as her blood trickled down the blade and dripped onto the floor.

"...Why?" she croaked.

"You are nothing but the Poisonous Rose of Ruin."

The man withdrew his sword. Alicia collapsed onto the marble floor. She touched her chest with a trembling hand, staining her slender fingers with fresh, warm blood.

Dimly, she registered the men running past her and the pool of blood around her body, but she no longer had the strength to stop them. Her vision clouded over as she bled out, her limbs going numb and powerless.

"Blinded by love, you have turned your back on the people, and this is the result. Repent for your sins in the afterlife."

Violet eyes gazed down upon Alicia in contempt. The man's jet-black hair made him look like the god of death. How fitting, since it was his sword that had mortally wounded Alicia.

Mind hazy, she questioned herself again and again.

Where did she go wrong? Her father, renowned for his wisdom, had loved her. The people, too, had adored her, singing her praises as the Blue Rose Princess. Her life should have been happy.

Yet the one she loved did not love her back, and now even her subjects had abandoned her, watching with scorn and hatred as she lay dying on the cold floor.

Hot tears ran down Alicia's cheeks. If she had made the right choices, would she have lived a different life? Would she be able to avoid such a tragic end?

Alicia didn't know how long she lay there, but the sudden thud of something heavy falling to the floor roused her out of her stupor, and she opened her eyes

slightly. She didn't remember closing them.

Something was moving in her field of vision, which was unfocused. A well-worn wooden cylinder rolled over and bumped against her cold fingers, coming to rest beside her hand.

And that was the last thing Alicia Chester Jorum ever saw before the light went out in her eyes forever.



...Or so she thought.

Alicia sat up in her large, canopied bed, breathing hard. Her heart hammered against her chest, and she was sweating profusely.

"Cia? Are you all right? ...Cia?"

Alicia ripped the negligee sticking to her sweaty skin off, searching for the mortal wound on her chest. But her soft, white skin was free of scars. Was this some kind of joke?

"She looks so pale. Maybe we should summon the attending physician after all?"

"But Your Majesty, the princess's temperature has already come down..."

Alicia stared at the pair of worried adults as they continued their conversation, as if she had seen a ghost. She could recognize that amiable, round face and plump body anywhere. There, seated by her bed with his brows creased with worry, was Alicia's father—King James, who had died during the latest war waged against Erdal.

If only. No, this isn't right at all. They must be ghosts.

Fearfully, Alicia forced her gaze toward the full-length mirror in the room. She had already caught a glimpse of an impossible image out of the corner of her eye and hesitated to look straight at it. But she had to face the truth.

A young girl stared back at Alicia through the large looking glass. She seemed to be about ten years old, with sky-blue hair and eyes, and her every movement mirrored Alicia's own.

There was no mistake. The girl in the mirror was Alicia herself.

“Huh...?”

Princess Alicia Chester, formerly Queen Alicia Chester Jorum, cocked her head to the side in utter confusion.

2. Revolutionary Awakening of the Blue Rose Princess

EYES fixed on the lace canopy above her head, Alicia assessed her situation as she lay alone in bed.

Heeding her wish to rest, King James and Lady Anri Fourier, chief lady-in-waiting, had left her chambers a while ago. Alicia sensed that she was the only one confused and buried her many questions. If she said the wrong thing, she could come across as ill or crazy.

Thus, it felt best to calm down in private and think things through.

First, and most important, was the fact that Alicia was now a ten-year-old girl. Her memories had been hazy when she first woke up, but now that she was calm and had time to think, she remembered that she was indeed still just a princess and had celebrated her tenth birthday last month.

What had she witnessed right before she woke up? If she'd told anyone, they'd surely tell her that it was all a dream and that she shouldn't worry about it.

After all, a high fever had confined Alicia to her bed since noon yesterday. Her consciousness had faded in and out until she finally fainted and slept under the care of her doctors and maids. Naturally, they would believe that her mind conjured up that horrible dream.

But Alicia was sure of one thing: it was not just a dream. It was a memory from a distant past, of something that really happened to her.

It's so strange...

Alicia glared up at the canopy, her cute face scrunched up in a frown.

In her dream, she had been the victim of a tragic incident. As a ten-year-old, it was hard for Alicia to recall the exact circumstances that led up to it. Despite that, she knew everything that had happened on the night of the revolution.

She knew, because she remembered it all. The intense memories were unforgettable. Her life bleeding out and her soul fading into eternal darkness were all too close, too real, as if it had all happened yesterday.

Summed up, she was sure that she had died.

And now, she was reliving her life.

...Argh, seriously! The more I try to remember, the hazier it gets.

Why was she still alive? For what reason?

Alicia had almost no information on what she decided to call her “previous life,” for simplicity’s sake. The circumstances that led up to the night of the revolution eluded her. No matter how she racked her brain, she couldn’t recall anything aside from what she’d witnessed and learned in her dream.

It was more than just an annoyance. She could be heading towards the same death once again.

If she had her memories from her previous life, she could systematically eliminate all threats and avoid the same fate. Unfortunately, Alicia only retained her memories from the night of the revolution. If she didn’t take action, she would die the same way.

N-Never again!

Caught up in thoughts of despair, she tossed and turned in her bed. A permanent death would have been better than facing such a tragic end again.

Did she have any clues to help her? Even a tiny one would do.

Just as Alicia tried to delve into her memories again, a soft knock sounded on her door.



“YOU look much better now, Your Highness. You were so pale when you woke up this morning.” Lady Anri Fourier, chief lady-in-waiting, spoke in a relieved voice. She held a hand against Alicia’s forehead while her maids, Annie and Martha, prepared her meal to one side.

Lady Fourier was a marchioness and veteran of the royal court who once

served as lady-in-waiting to Alicia's late mother, the queen. Despite being less personable than others, she was a righteous woman with a heart for honesty and justice. Paired with her vast knowledge of numerous important subjects, she had gained the trust of the king and other ladies at court.

That said, Alicia vaguely recalled that she hadn't spotted Lady Fourier anywhere on the night of the revolution. Was she still around and Alicia just missed seeing her, or had she retired from court? Alicia didn't know. It irritated her when the memories flitted just out of her reach.

"I had a bad dream," Alicia said. "Did I say anything in my sleep?"

"Your fever wouldn't go down; even I felt afraid." Lady Fourier nodded casually and dismissed Alicia's subtle probing. She seemed to believe Alicia was upset due to her weakened state, unaware of her regained memories.

Alicia held her tongue and ate the bread porridge Annie had prepared for her. In truth, anxiety about the future weighed heavily on her chest, and she had zero appetite. However, forcing herself to swallow the food helped repress her memories of the dream.

Lady Fourier was a reliable person, but she was far from approachable. If Alicia told her about her future death, Lady Fourier would think she'd gone mad.

And it wasn't just Lady Fourier. As she lay in bed, Alicia had made up her mind. She wouldn't tell anyone about her memories. No one would believe her, and it was unwise to speak openly about things that she herself couldn't explain.

Under the guise of calm, Alicia struggled to finish the porridge, which sat like lead in her stomach. Lady Fourier frowned worriedly at the sight.

"Your Highness, your fever may be gone, but you must still be tired. Let us give tonight's ceremony a miss."

"Ceremony? Erm, what is supposed to be happening today?" Alicia cocked her head in confusion, but Lady Fourier had anticipated Alicia's response, for her reply came immediately.

"The ceremony to recognize the services rendered by the inspection squad

that is returning from Erdal today. Only the nobles are invited, so His Majesty said that there is no need for Your Highness to attend if you are still unwell. And just this once, I agree with that judgment.”

That made sense. Alicia would never have made the effort to remember something like that. She had always been bad at handling crowded settings like royal ceremonies. The king had always doted on her since she lost her mother at a young age. He rarely required her to participate in ceremonies, except for diplomatic ones involving other nations.

“Then I’ll just take advantage of Father’s—”

Alicia’s relief was short-lived as her voice trailed off and her heart began to thunder. The terrifyingly handsome man, looking down at her with contempt, appeared in her mind’s eye.

“Your Highness? Is something the matter?”

“No...”

Lady Fourier’s eyes narrowed as she watched Alicia hug her trembling shoulders.

Who was that man? Her attacker with jet-black hair and violet eyes? Alicia didn’t know. Yet she recalled wondering if he was a member of the nobility during their confrontation in her previous life.

If he was a noble, she might spot him at one of the various court ceremonies. At the very least, she could glean more clues about her past from his striking appearance.

He was just like the god of death. Alicia’s fair skin crawled at the memory. Yet it would be more terrifying if she didn’t find out who he was.

“Please tell Father that I’ll attend tonight’s ceremony, after all,” she said firmly.

“Pardon?”

“Huh?!”

Lady Fourier’s famed “Iron Mask” slipped. Behind her, Annie and Martha both gasped in surprise before covering each other’s mouths.

“Is that really surprising?” Alicia cocked her head. “...Or is it too sudden, and I’m causing more trouble for everyone?”

“Not at all!”

The three women protested in unison, then exchanged glances with each other. After a moment, Lady Fourier cleared her throat and spoke.

“We are always ready to help Your Highness fulfill your role as the princess, any time you may wish. Please do not worry. It was just surprising, since this is the first time Your Highness has expressed a desire to attend...” Though her expression was once again guarded, Lady Fourier’s honest words betrayed her excitement.

It was true that up until now, Alicia had always come up with excuses to shirk her court duties, as much as her father, the king, permitted. Because of this, Lady Fourier had always advised her to attend the beginning of such events. It was the least Alicia could do, since she would be missing out on the balls later on anyway because she had not yet made her societal debut.

It used to feel like too much trouble, so Alicia had always ignored the advice. Now, Lady Fourier’s excitement made her feel even more ashamed.

“I just changed my mind,” Alicia said bashfully. “I thought that maybe I should make more public appearances and learn more about the nobility... Why are you crying, is it really that big of a deal?”

“No, no. I am just so touched to see Your Highness being so grown up. Queen Lisbeth must be so happy in heaven now,” Lady Fourier said tearfully.

The late Queen Lisbeth was Alicia’s mother. She and Lady Fourier had been close friends, even before the latter became a lady-in-waiting.

Perhaps that was why Lady Fourier promised to help her late friend raise her daughter to be a wonderful princess. Then again, it felt a little strange that she sounded so happy just because Alicia said she would attend some ceremony.

Soon, the strangely excited Lady Fourier and her equally enthusiastic maids bombarded Alicia with orders, eager to get her ready.

I should have called in sick after all, Alicia grumbled in her heart.



THE court orchestra played while members of the nobility stood in a line on either side of a red carpet that ran down the middle of the great hall. At the end of the carpet was a dais where the king of Heilland sat on his throne, with Alicia sitting quietly by his side.

“Look, it’s Princess Alicia. She’s so lovely today.”

“She looks more like Queen Lisbeth by the day.”

“She is truly Heilland’s blooming Blue Rose Princess.”

“Will King James be selecting a gentleman for his beloved princess soon?”

Alicia held back a sigh as she tried her hardest to ignore the stares of the numerous nobles around the great hall. Perhaps this was too much trouble after all.

In Alicia’s memories, her mother was a beautiful woman who always wore a gentle smile. She used to stroke Alicia’s hair and call her “my beloved child.” And because of his deep love for her mother, King James had never taken a second wife, despite only having Alicia as his sole heir.

Therefore, the aristocracy were more invested in Alicia’s life than they would be in the life of a regular princess. After all, whoever became Alicia’s husband would one day become Heilland’s king.

Of course, there had been periods in Heilland’s long history when the nation had been ruled by queens. However, it had always been a temporary reign until the queen’s husband was pronounced king or a male relative stepped in to take the throne.

Therefore, all the noble families with a ranking of marquis or higher would flock to present their sons whenever Alicia made a public appearance. Even on the best of days, attending her royal lessons from morning until night exhausted Alicia. The additional chore of having to be surrounded by these hopeful nobles was a true pain.

That’s why I hate these public appearances so much.

Despite her inner complaint, Alicia maintained a smile, as she’d been taught

to do during her lessons. Besides, the reason Alicia decided to break her routine and attend this ceremony was that problematic man with the jet-black hair.

He's not here...is he?

Alicia frowned as her gaze swept over the nobles lined up along the great hall. Thankfully, she was seated on the dais, giving her a great view despite her short stature. She spotted countless heads of blond, silver, red, and brown hair, but none of that conspicuous color she was looking for.

Would this be a waste of time, after all?

Alicia hadn't expected to find the man so easily, but she was disappointed all the same. Suddenly, she realized that she was also anxious about meeting the man again.

"Cia, are you feeling all right?"

King James's gaze was full of worry as Alicia's shoulders drooped and she leaned back against her seat. His Majesty's retainers once called him the Fortune God of the East. While Alicia had never seen a Fortune God before, she thought the name fitting for her father, a sociable man with a personality and appearance that everyone, from their retainers to the common people, loved and admired.

"I'm all right, Father," she told him with a smile. "Will the ceremony be starting soon?"

"You are free to leave anytime you feel unwell."

Alicia nodded, and King James smiled, stroking her hair gently so as not to mess up the hairstyle Annie and the maids had made for her. Then, as if on cue, the king's chief adviser, Nigel Otto, raised his right hand.

A loud fanfare played as King James and Alicia rose, spreading their arms to welcome the inspection squad. Two knights in full armor pulled the double doors leading into the great hall open. The members of the inspection squad stood on the red carpet, right in the center of the opened doorway.

All ten members of the squad were remarkable individuals, ranging from those handpicked by the various government ministries to several sons of

influential noblemen on the Privy Council, the advisory body of the king, to top graduates from the Royal Academy, the kingdom's top educational institution.

Two years on an inspection mission in Erdal had made their gazes discerning and their demeanor dignified. Alicia watched them bow, then froze as her eyes landed on a particular member.

There he stood, right before her petrified eyes. His glossy black hair moved as he slowly lifted his handsome, fair face up, and Alicia lowered her gaze before those impressive eyes could meet her own.

He was here. She hadn't expected to find him so soon.

The music played by the court orchestra, together with the murmuring of the nobles as they watched the squad move down the carpeted walkway, all faded away. Alicia could only hear her heart beating wildly in her chest and the sure footsteps of the man as he came closer.

She lifted her gaze slightly, seeing the man she'd first met on the night of the revolution. The one who drew near her with his dimly shining sword in hand, his violet eyes burning with hatred, and curses on his thin lips.

Her body trembled with terror as sweat dripped down her back. Each step the man took towards her filled her heart with despair. Death, death itself, was bearing down on Alicia.

Just as she was about to scream, a large hand landed on her shoulder.

"Cia, you look very pale."

King James's whispered words dispelled the illusion, and Alicia was brought back to reality. The black-haired man was not holding a sword, nor were his features twisted with rage.

"...I apologize, Father."

Suddenly exhausted, Alicia let out a breath as the ten members of the inspection squad lined up before the throne.

"Your Majesty. I am Riddhe Sutherland, the first son of Loid Sutherland. We would like to express our sincerest gratitude for arranging such an occasion for us tonight."

The squad members knelt down, bowing before the king as the man in the center spoke on their behalf. The House of Sutherland was a ducal family whose current head, Lord Loid, sat on the Privy Council. Perhaps Riddhe's manner of speech and conduct seemed pretentious to Alicia because of the status of his house.

"I appreciate the hard work all of you have put into this long mission. Was the time abroad well spent?" King James asked.

"Of course. And while we fully trusted in Heiland's prestige, our neighbor was still full of surprises."

Riddhe and King James continued to exchange words of acknowledgment, while Alicia stole glances at the black-haired man, who remained kneeling with his head bowed.

He was much younger than she remembered, though the striking color of his hair and eyes, his frighteningly beautiful face, and his well-proportioned body were the same. However, his side profile was much more youthful and softer, without the sharpness like a cutting blade that she remembered seeing in her previous life.

"This mission by the inspection squad was organized to fulfill one of our late king's dearest wishes, which was to restore diplomatic relations with our neighbor," King James said, his tone regal. "I look forward to seeing you put your mission findings to use for our kingdom."

"Thank you for your kind words. We will surely dedicate our lives to this cause." Riddhe bowed deeply, his tone dramatic. King James called for the squad to rise.

"Riddhe Sutherland."

"Your Majesty!"

Starting with Riddhe, the king announced each of the members by name. Every man gave a short affirmation as his name was called, ears and cheeks dusted red with pride. Finally, all the members were acknowledged, leaving the black-haired man for last. Alicia held her breath, not wanting to miss a single word.

“Clovis Cromwell.”

“Your Majesty.”

In contrast to his gentle appearance, the man’s voice was deep and pleasant. Alicia carved that name deep into her heart.

Clovis Cromwell.

The name of the man who would take Alicia’s life in the near future.

Wrapping up the acknowledgments, King James raised his arms again, addressing the nobles gathered in the great hall. “I hereby congratulate the squad on their safe return and bless all their future endeavors. Let us rejoice. May this day mark a new beginning for our kingdom.”

“Glory to Heiland!”

The crowd in the hall echoed Lord Otto’s cry, and with a burst of cheers, the night’s banquet began. The court orchestra, which had been playing loud fanfare all evening, switched to a light waltz. Swift and silent, servants lined up plates of snacks on tables as each guest sipped on glasses of bubbling amber liquid.

“Your Majesty, it is time.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Lady Fourier had whispered in the king’s ear, and he nodded. The guests would soon dance, eat, and socialize, which Alicia could not participate in prior to her societal debut.

Alicia herself was ready to go. Not only had she found her harbinger of death, but she had also learned his name. Tonight’s work was done. She did not wish to spend a moment longer in the same room as him.

After this, she would perhaps look through the Nobility Records to gather more information on Clovis Cromwell. Full of such thoughts, she gathered up her skirts as she’d been taught, curtsied to her father, and turned to leave.

Suddenly, the king’s chief adviser spoke up. “Your Majesty, Your Highness. You seem in a good mood.”

“Oh, Nigel. Thank you for your work tonight.”

Lord Otto, who had been in charge of the ceremony, smiled in response. Alicia straightened her back. Nigel Otto was a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, regarded highly by the king for his work ethic and humility. Alicia was also fond of him, and she knew he had a soft spot for her as well.

“Good evening, Nigel,” she greeted with a smile. “I am most glad to see you, but it is time for me to take my leave.”

“I am aware, and that is why I hurried over.”

Lady Fourier’s eyebrow twitched at Lord Otto’s words. She was just as curious as Alicia to hear what he had to say. Why did he seem so eager to keep Alicia in the great hall?

“I see you have your reasons. Feel free to speak,” King James prompted.

“Your Majesty, Your Highness, there are a couple of young men I would like you to meet. I think they will be strong pillars of support during Your Majesty’s reign and even during Princess Alicia’s.”

“I see, I see.” King James’s interest was piqued, his eyes shining with delight. “They must be great men for you to speak so highly of them. I would like to meet them as well. You may present them to us.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty... You may approach.” The chief adviser looked back over his shoulder and called out to someone behind him. Following his gaze, Alicia regretted not taking her leave sooner.

“I see. So, these are the men Nigel wants us to meet.”

“Thank you for granting us an audience, Your Majesty.”

King James’s almond-colored eyes crinkled as he smiled at Robert von Belt and Clovis Cromwell, the two members of the inspection squad brought before him. The men looked nervous; their heads were bowed as they introduced themselves to the king.

Why must you be here?

Alicia glared at Clovis’s annoyingly well-groomed face as she stood behind her father, partially hiding herself. She’d never met him, not even once, in her

previous life, so why were they coming into such close contact in just a single night now?

As if sensing her scrutiny, violet eyes looked up and caught Alicia's gaze. Clovis wielding his sword, his eyes fiery, and her blood staining the marble floor red, flashed before Alicia's eyes. She trembled violently.

Clovis must have been baffled by the young princess's strange behavior, given the way her face paled and she averted her gaze so quickly from his, but she couldn't bring herself to put up a front anymore. Hiding her quivering hands, she prayed for Clovis to leave as soon as possible.

"So, Nigel?" King James prompted. "I met these men at the ceremony, yet you've brought them before me again. What has prompted such recognition?"

"Your Majesty, I am proud to say that the inspection squad is made up of talented men worthy of leading the kingdom one day. That said, these two in particular are by far the most promising, so I wished to present them to you."

Alicia's prayers for this encounter to conclude went unheard, as King James looked over the two young men with interest. "Von Belt, you are a representative of the Order of Knights. And Cromwell is the top graduate from our Royal Academy."

Robert gasped. "How did Your Majesty manage to remember?!"

As befitted a member of the Order of Knights, Robert was a handsome and gallant young man, with straight silver hair neatly tied in a single ponytail.

"You were sent as our representatives to the neighboring country," King James replied. "I would not forget why I selected you."

"I apologize for my rudeness. Please forgive me." Robert flushed with embarrassment as King James laughed good-naturedly.

After a moment, Lord Otto spoke up. "Forgive them for being a little blunt, but the reports on Erdal submitted by these two were well-written and to the point. Not only did they present a multifaceted analysis from a wider perspective, but their audacity to propose certain measures for our kingdom to adopt is also worthy of praise."

“That’s right, Nigel. I recall you submitting two reports for me to read, but you blacked out the names of the authors. Were they written by these men?”

The chief adviser’s smile was enough to confirm the king’s suspicions.

Amused, King James leaned forward, ordering the two young men to look up. “I greatly enjoyed reading your reports. While there are some parts to be refined, you have clearly pointed out the good and bad aspects of both our country and Erdal. And that suggestion, which came from both of you, to abolish the appointment of ranks based on social standing? I really liked that.”

The two young men looked at each other, eyes wide. Alicia was just as taken aback.

In Heiland, social standing was everything. Social disparity between the commoners and the nobility was a given, and even among the latter, families were strictly ranked and divided by the titles they held. It was not uncommon for relatives related by blood to hold the highest positions closest to the king.

In addition, Alicia learned from her elderly tutor that things used to be worse in the past. For example, some barons held mid-ranked management positions in today’s ministries. This was unheard of during the reign of the king just two generations ago. Thus, a proposal to abolish social standing was extremely radical in Heiland. And to hear that the king liked the idea was certainly hard to believe.

“The lords who have sworn fealty to me would faint if they read your proposals. However, our proud history should not be a shackle that holds us back from the future. So I’m glad to hear such progressive ideas from our potential young leaders,” King James said with a smile.

“Indeed.”

It was Lady Fourier who had spoken. Even the king was surprised by the brilliant head lady-in-waiting, giving her a glance before looking back to the dumbfounded young men with a smile.

“Of course, it is too revolutionary an idea to put into practice at once. Hasty reform can ruin a country... However, it is not a bad idea for the future. Continue your good work, and let us discuss this matter again sometime.”

“Th-Thank you for your kind words!”

Gracing the emotional duo with a nod, King James looked towards his chief adviser with a mischievous glint in his eye. “So, my good adviser. What are your plans for these two?”

Alicia frowned, her eyebrows drawn together. Was this different from how things played out in her previous life? It was clear from the conversation that Lord Otto planned to offer important positions in the government or military to the two men.

Yet Alicia had not known about Clovis at all until the night of the revolution. That meant that he didn’t hold any important position in the government, much less one that would catch the royal family’s eye.

Then again, her husband Fritz had been the one to take the throne, so maybe she, as the queen, just didn’t get the chance to meet Clovis. Yet he was someone that her father, King James, also had high hopes for. It was strange that Alicia had never even heard of him.

“Yes, Your Majesty. If I may be so bold—”

“...Well, well. What an interesting lineup we have here.”

While Alicia was puzzling over the situation, a voice off to the side interrupted Nigel’s recommendation to the king.

Lord Otto closed his eyes briefly, then glanced sternly towards the boorish intruder who had come to stand next to him. “Lord Riddhe, isn’t it rude to interrupt someone when they are having an audience with the king?”

“I apologize. I only decided to join in because my squad members are here.” Riddhe Sutherland apologized, though it sounded far from sincere. His eyes, peeking out from beneath his reddish hair, were trained on his fellow squad members. Then, instead of backing off, he stepped in front of the others to face the king. “Your Majesty, forgive me if this sounds incredulous, but has Lord Otto requested an audience with your esteemed person to promote Clovis Cromwell?”

“It is as you said.”

Riddhe threw his body back dramatically at the king's affirmation. "Oh, how deplorable! To bring one of Graham's clan, the one with blood on his hands, before the king!"

"Lord Riddhe, stop this at once!!" Lord Otto barked.

"Blood on his hands...?" Alicia hadn't meant to speak out loud, but it was too late. Before Lord Otto could stop him, Riddhe had knelt before her. His face seemed ugly, twisted with glee at the chance to disparage Clovis.

"Dear Princess Alicia, it seems that your tutors have deemed this story unnecessary to teach you. But since it's such an important story that concerns the royal family, Riddhe Sutherland will be honored to tell it to you."

Placing a hand upon his chest in a theatrical manner as if he were a bard, Riddhe spoke quickly, but at the top of his voice. "It happened during the reign of the late King Henry VII. To cement diplomatic relations, the young king took the princess of neighboring Erdal as his bride. As you know, the princess became our Dowager Queen Catherine."

Alicia nodded; these names were familiar to her. King Henry VII, her grandfather, had been sickly, choosing to pass the crown early to his son and retiring to a villa with Dowager Queen Catherine. While Alicia seldom got to see her grandparents due to the distance, they were kind people whom she loved.

"Now, our relationship with Erdal was rocky back then, like barely thawed snow, when Queen Catherine married. Some of the nobles with radical ideologies did not approve of the marriage. And who was the leader of those protesters...?"

Riddhe paused as if in thought, then snapped his fingers and pointed straight at Clovis. "Oh yes! It was Zach Graham, the grandfather of that man over there."

Clovis's mouth tightened in a grimace. Riddhe noticed it, too, as he smoothly picked up his story.

"Oh, and how sinful Graham was! He despised our neighbor Erdal so much that he plotted to have Queen Catherine killed!"

"Riddhe Sutherland!" Nigel bellowed.

“I will not stop. It will be disrespectful to our intelligent Princess Alicia if I halt the story here.”

It was rare to see Nigel angry, but Alicia was more concerned about Clovis. It pained her to see how pale he had gotten, and she grew worried, as if she had not been gripped by terror at the sight of him just a while ago.

“However, his scheme was exposed before it could be put into action. Cornered by knights in his mansion, he turned on everyone, killing servants and knights indiscriminately. Yes, I heard he was an amazing swordsman, so when it was all over, the mansion was drenched in fresh blood. Finally, Graham died without remorse at the hands of the knights.” Riddhe’s mouth curved up into a smirk.

“With the head of the family a dead criminal, the House of Graham fell into disgrace,” he continued. “A number of their estates, including their title as marquises, were taken away, and the family was practically destroyed. But how dreadful is this? His traitorous blood lives on, and now he stands before His Majesty without a shred of shame.”

Riddhe’s voice dropped to a whisper, as if he were telling a secret. “There he is, Clovis Cromwell.”

Having had enough, Clovis turned on his heel. Alicia caught a glimpse of his face. It was so white, it looked like he might collapse at any moment.

With a quick bow to the king, Robert took off hastily after his comrade. Nigel seemed to want to do the same, but decorum would not permit it. Instead, he turned his rage on Riddhe.

“What have you done?!”

“Now this is strange. I have not spoken any lies. I just gave Princess Alicia a history lesson on the royal family.” Riddhe shrugged, feigning innocence, but his gaze narrowed and turned spiteful. “Besides, Lord Otto, your disregard for the order of things has gone a little too far. What is all this about you appointing newbies as advisers? All the older noble houses can see how you favor the newer families.”

“I choose talented individuals who are worthy of serving the king!” Lord Otto

rebutted.

“I understand. As King James’s right-hand man, we all know that you wouldn’t stoop to messing up the order of things just for the fun of it.” With this shrewd mention of King James, Riddhe continued to run Lord Otto down. “As long as you do not lose sight of who is really supporting this kingdom, the Privy Council will not intervene. Make sure you never forget that.”

Upon seeing the troubled expression on the chief adviser’s face, Riddhe smiled triumphantly as he apologized to the king for his rudeness. The kind-hearted king, who should have been offended by the events, merely accepted Riddhe’s apology without saying a word.

He might be the king, but if he chose to support Nigel here, it would only cause a further divide between his chief adviser and the other members of the Privy Council. He could only watch Clovis walk away, his expression unreadable.

Even at the age of ten, Alicia understood his intentions. And yet...

It hurt her to see Clovis moving further away as if fleeing, ignoring Robert’s pleas to get him to come back.

Gone was the pride of having served the kingdom well and the exaltation of being invited to an audience with the king. All that was left was an anguished young man, tormented by a past he could not escape.

For Alicia, it was too much to bear.

Even if Riddhe spoke the truth, Zach Graham should be the one condemned, not Clovis. Yet there he was, treating himself as if he were a criminal as he bore the unreasonable guilt.

Alicia finally understood why she had never heard of Clovis in her previous life. Perhaps tonight’s ceremony was the last time he would be seen on the kingdom’s political scene. He would have turned down Lord Otto’s offered appointment and shied away from attending any more ceremonies or court balls to escape the merciless stares.

What else would he have gone through until the night of the revolution, when he appeared before her? But he was an intelligent man, so he would have kept an eye on the kingdom even as he stayed out of the spotlight.

Maybe it was dissatisfaction with the current way of appointing ranks, distrust of the new foreign king Fritz, or even frustration at Alicia herself, the last member of Heiland's royal family. With so much brewing inside of him and nothing he could have done about it, Clovis finally returned to the castle, bringing the revolution with him.

Before she knew it, Alicia had dashed off the dais.

Surprised gasps came from the nobles at the sight of the ten-year-old princess running away from her father's side. Her light blue skirts fluttered around her as she sprinted, and someone gushed: "How cute is she!"

Alicia ignored them all. Her eyes were fixed on Clovis's tall, retreating back. Having shaken off Robert, he was weaving his way through the waltzing nobles alone.

The lonely sight reminded Alicia of herself on the night of the revolution.

She knew the fear and pain well. When people threw insults at her. When nobody felt like an ally and the entire world was against her. No matter how calm Clovis looked on the surface, Alicia knew that his heart was crying tears of blood.

"Goodness!"

"Your Highness?!"

Alicia pushed her small body forward, through the waltzing couples, who stopped and parted, staring at her with wide eyes. The flowing hems of red and yellow gowns looked like colorful flowers blooming on a hill, clearing a path for Alicia.

Finally, she caught up to the tall figure, who had resolutely not looked back since he first turned to walk away.

"Wait, Clovis Cromwell!"

"...Your Highness?"

Clovis, whose right hand was now clasped by a small one, turned. His almond-shaped eyes grew wide. For the first time, Alicia held his gaze without looking away.



The violet eyes she'd feared so much were beautiful and clear, with an air of nobility. His glossy black hair made his flawless light skin stand out even more. He looked right back at Alicia, speechless.

Alicia caught a glimpse of fear in the depths of his eyes and sighed. What had she been so afraid of? The Clovis who killed her and the Clovis before her might technically be the same person, but they could not be more different.

"Princess!"

Lord Otto had run after Alicia, and she could sense him stopping behind her. She maintained her grip on Clovis's hand.

"Nigel, this man is capable, isn't he?!"

When no reply came, Alicia turned around. Lord Otto swallowed hard at the sight of the princess's large, sky-blue eyes trained on him. She might only be ten, but the way she stood before Clovis, as if shielding him, her eyes shining with determination, was a beautiful and noble sight.

"I'm asking one more time. Clovis Cromwell is capable, isn't he?" she asked, her voice firm.

The surrounding nobles, who had been smiling affectionately at their princess, cocked their heads curiously, waiting to see how the chief adviser would react to Alicia's uncharacteristic behavior. Even the court orchestra had stopped playing to watch.

Pierced by the princess's gaze, Nigel came to his senses and answered truthfully.

"Yes. To my knowledge, there is no better man in his cohort."

"That is all I need to know."

Gracing Lord Otto with a dignified smile, Alicia turned back to Clovis. They locked eyes, and Alicia found that she was no longer afraid of this hesitant man, nor did she want to keep him away.

"Clovis, you are to serve by my side. This is your princess's order," she declared in a resounding voice.

A commotion rippled through the crowd. Some nobles frowned, recognizing Clovis. However, before their cruel words could reach them, Alicia repeated her request, her voice sweet like a nightingale.

“You are to become the princess’s adviser. Do you accept the appointment?”

“But I’m...” Clovis’s gaze wavered.

Then a bright, booming voice rang out through the great hall. “Won’t you accept?”

It was the king. He stood behind Nigel, watching Clovis and Alicia with a kind smile. “I’d appreciate it if you’d say yes. Once my daughter makes up her mind, there’s no talking her out of it.”

“Your Majesty! Please remember my warning!” cried Riddhe, who had also dashed over in a panic.

“Oh dear, but I just can’t say no to my princess. I wouldn’t want my cute daughter to hate me, now, would I?” The king responded in a mischievous tone, throwing a wink at Alicia.

Alicia nodded, knowing that her father was letting her make the final decision. She addressed Clovis once more. “Please. I promised Lady Fourier that I would take my court duties seriously from now on. There’s so much I need to learn from an adviser, even during my free time... Or are you reluctant to serve under someone like me?”

“Not at all!”

Alicia’s feigned disappointment was met with a vigorous denial from a flustered Clovis. Then, seeing Alicia look up at him for an answer, he pressed his lips together in a thin line, seemingly making up his mind. To Alicia, it looked as if he was on the verge of tears.

Taking Alicia’s hand, Clovis knelt with his head bowed.

“I, Clovis, will devote everything I have to serving you, Princess Alicia.”

“...That’s a big promise, Clovis,” Alicia admonished.

Indeed, “devote everything” was a heavy phrase to use. If what happened in her previous life was any indication, Alicia knew that a devoted Clovis was

capable of anything.

But this Clovis looked at her with a smile. He probably mistook Alicia's words for a light-hearted joke.

He's just like a prince...

Alicia stood in a daze, her hand still in Clovis's; this moment was forever etched into her ten-year-old heart. His flawless, beautiful face and smile as he entrusted his heart to her were so intense that it felt like her own heart was completely stolen away.

3. Pact with the Messenger of the Stars

THE next thing she knew, Alicia was standing on top of a hill underneath countless twinkling stars.

Where is this...?

She was clad in a simple dress and standing barefoot on soft grass. She looked up and around her.

Calmly, she deduced that she was probably in a dream. After appointing Clovis Cromwell as the princess's adviser, she had taken her leave of the banquet.

After that, Lady Fourier reprimanded her for running in her court gown, and then Annie and Martha assisted her in the bath before she fell into her soft, fluffy bed.

This is such a strange place.

Alicia was standing on the top of the hill. The gentle plains stretched endlessly as far as she could see. There were no houses or even trees, and it was deathly quiet under the sky laden with stars, without even a chirp from an insect.

If this was a dream, then it was a bad one. Dreams were supposed to guide one, letting the story unfold without any input from the dreamer. It should not abandon one in a desolate spot with no hint of how one should proceed.

"Sorry for leaving you all alone. I'm a poor excuse for a gentleman, making a lovely lady so anxious."

Alicia jumped as a friendly voice came from somewhere nearby. She turned, her flowing hair glinting under the starlight. A young boy had materialized next to her.

His overall appearance seemed devoid of color. His fine, soft-looking hair could hardly be labeled as blond; his gently sloping brows gave him a kind

appearance; and his long lashes framed golden eyes. His smooth white skin looked like it was made of Oriental porcelain, which, coupled with his extraordinary beauty, made him seem otherworldly and mysterious.

But where did he come from? There was no place to hide, and Alicia was sure that she had been alone up until a moment ago.

“You deemed this to be a dream on your own. And I’ve always been close by.”

“You can read my mind?!” Alicia gasped. The youth placed a hand over his mouth, as if he’d said too much.

“...That’s beside the point. I’ve been waiting forever for you to come again. I’m so glad you regained your memories, even just small fragments of them.”

“What are you saying? I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

“Really? You don’t recognize me, Alicia?”

How did he know her name? From their short conversation thus far, Alicia knew that it would be useless to ask such questions. No matter what he said, Alicia was sure that none of the people she knew were as ethereal as this boy.

Just as she was about to refute him, Alicia flinched and went silent.

This deep blue sky brimming with stars. The hill in an endless sea of grass. The mysterious boy clad in simple, undecorated clothes.

“I know this place...” Alicia murmured to herself, earning a clap from the boy.

“Indeed, you do. I am the messenger of the stars. And it was I who granted you the chance to redo your life.”

Redo her life. Yes, that was what the boy had said.

“You keep calling me a boy, but I’m so much older than you. Besides, if we’re talking about appearances, don’t you think you look younger than me anyway?”

As the messenger of the stars prattled on about age, Alicia ruminated on the words “redo your life.”

“So, that dream I saw...” she ventured in a fearful tone.

“It really happened. You died that night. Then, with the guidance of the guardian star, you appeared before me, right here.”

Despite the lack of any injury, her chest suddenly hurt, and Alicia pressed a hand to her heart. The messenger gave a wry smile.

“It’s okay. As we agreed upon in our pact, the future events that you saw in your memories—yes, the one you refer to as your “previous life”—have all been undone.”

“Our...pact?”

“Yes, our pact.”

The moment the messenger spoke those words, a silent wind picked up between them. Alicia thought she saw a flash of a thread, thinner than silk, fluttering in the wind and connecting her to the messenger.

“I introduced myself back then as well, but I guess you haven’t retained your memories of that. So, once again, I am the messenger of the stars, and I hope I’m not being too forward when I say that I’m an incarnation of the guardian star of this kingdom.”

“Guardian star... You mean the one that bestowed Heilland to King Estel, our founding father?”

“If you guys have another guardian star, feel free to introduce us, though I’ll be jealous if I have to share.”

Most of the stories about King Estel, Heilland’s first monarch, had been elevated to the status of myth. Among them, the most fantastical story was the one about how the kingdom was founded based on “a pact with the guardian star.”

Despite her distaste for studying, Alicia remembered the story, thanks to her father, Lord Otto, and her tutors repeatedly retelling it to her.

Several hundred years ago, before Heilland existed as a nation, a large-scale persecution of “heretics” broke out on the continent. Back then, a certain religion used its power and influence to oppress any vassal who didn’t swear loyalty to its Supreme Priest, labeling them as “evil heretics.”

In the marquisate of Chester, Heilland’s predecessor, the stars were revered as incarnations of the gods. The Astromancy Sect, which divined the future from

the movement of stars, was the major religion. In order to protect his people from religious oppression, Marquis Estel of Chester vowed to lead them to a new land.

“Finally, Estel arrived at Heilland, a barren land untouched by humans, where it rained and snowed so often that even trees could not grow.” The messenger of the stars paused a moment, then added. “But I loved it.”

Heilland, a barren land...

That was where Estel’s people, who had barely escaped with their lives, had ended up. Guarded by numerous spirits who had made it their home, it was not the best place for humans to thrive. The messenger of the stars had asked if this was where they planned to settle.

Estel replied that they revered the stars as gods. They would follow and live anywhere they were guided, as long as they could see the stars shine. Satisfied, the messenger formed a pact with Estel and gave his blessing for Estel to rule the land as its king. And that was how the kingdom of Heilland was founded.

“To be honest, Estel did a great job. In spite of the unforgiving natural environment, he worked with his people and found ways to survive through trial and error. He probably would have done well with or without my blessing.” The messenger closed his eyes as he reminisced, but Alicia was itching to move on.

“My history tutor has already told me countless times about why you formed a pact with our founding father, King Estel. Now, please tell me about my pact!”

“I’m just getting to the good part. The pact I made with Estel is actually deeply intertwined with the one I made with you. Has anyone told you what I said to him when we formed the pact?”

“Erm, something like, ‘As the guardian star of Heilland, I will lead the kingdom to eternal prosperity’?”

“Yes! As expected of the crown princess, you got it exactly right. Despite that, I failed that night, and Heilland fell into ruin.”

“Fell into ruin?!”

Alicia's eyes widened, and the messenger looked surprised.

"Didn't you know? With your death and King Fritz's escape with his mistress, Heiland was left without any rulers. Did you think the kingdom would survive long after that?"

"I...guess not."

Alicia cast her eyes down and felt a sharp pain in her chest. While she didn't know the exact circumstances that led to the events of that night, she realized that the glorious history of Heiland had ended with her. And to make things worse, it had all happened in that place, carved with the names of all the great men who had ruled the kingdom through the generations before her.

"I know what our pact is about. You manipulated time to give me the chance to redo my life. In exchange, I will use my second chance to save Heiland, thus helping you to keep your promise to our founding father. Am I right?"

"I love smart girls like you. Has anyone told you how clever you are for a ten-year-old?" The messenger of the stars sounded happy, though Alicia's expression remained dark.

"But it's impossible," she said. "I can't change the future. I mean, I'd completely forgotten about my previous life until that dream."

Alicia lowered her head dejectedly, but the messenger spoke up kindly. "What are you saying? You've already made a different choice than you did in your previous life, haven't you?"

Lifted by his words, Alicia looked up and saw herself reflected in the messenger's light-colored eyes as he showed her an affectionate smile.

"Clovis Cromwell."

Alicia's heart leapt as the name left the messenger's lips. Behind her closed eyes, she saw the figure of that handsome man kneeling before her with his head bowed.

"As you probably know, you never interacted with Clovis until that last night in your previous life. But this time, your quick wit has allowed the two of you to form an important bond. It is an amazing development that has exceeded my

expectations.”

Alicia remembered Clovis when he was on the verge of tears and his eyes as he looked at her with admiration and respect. While she wasn’t sure if she’d altered the future as much as the messenger seemed to imply, her impression of Clovis was definitely different compared to the night of the revolution.

“Look at this, Alicia.”

With a flick of his wrist, a long, thin wooden cylinder appeared in the messenger’s hand. Alicia let out a gasp as she recognized the shape of it.

“I’ve seen that before, on that night, just before I lost consciousness.”

“This is called a kaleidoscope. The craftsman who made it lives in a town in the countryside. You should visit him when you get the chance.”

The messenger gave a teasing grin as he pointed to the sky, then twirled the wooden cylinder on his palm. Looking up at the stars, Alicia was stunned. The stars in the sky were spinning, copying the movement of the wooden cylinder.

“What’s happening?!”

“I told you. This is a kaleidoscope. The trick is accomplished by having opposing mirrors inside, so you can change the image you see just by spinning it. It’s a really interesting item. And what you are doing with your life is just like this.”

The stars twinkled as they formed pattern after pattern in the sky. Alicia couldn’t tear her eyes away from the fantastic sight. Watching the sky with her, the messenger continued to speak.

“The people, the nations, and all the pieces that make up the world are still the same as in your previous life. But the scenes can change in an infinite number of ways, depending on the choices *you* make.”

The messenger then held the wooden cylinder still, and the stars in the sky halted their movements, too. They settled into the quiet, breathtaking beauty of a regular night sky.

“Now that Clovis Cromwell is by your side, even I cannot predict how the future will turn out. However, just like how you’ve carved out a new future by

choosing him, your choices from now on can also prevent the night of the revolution from ever happening.”

Alicia’s sky-blue hair fluttered in the wind. The unease that had plagued her heart since she dreamed of her previous life lifted.

Of course, nothing much had changed. Alicia still didn’t know much about her previous life aside from her dream, and the messenger didn’t seem eager to share either. However, the fact that she’d already chosen a different path made the future seem just a little brighter.

“You only have one chance to redo your life. And this is all I can do to help you.”

Suddenly, the scenery around Alicia turned hazy, and she instinctively understood that she was about to wake up. As the rolling hills and starry sky faded away, she reached out towards the boy.

“Will I ever get to see you again?”

“Maybe. Even if you can’t find me, I’ll be watching over you and this kingdom. Never forget that.”

For a brief moment, the boy’s thin fingers brushed against Alicia’s small hand. But before she knew it, the hill with the stars dissolved in the distance, and Alicia woke up back in her bed, her hand stretched up towards the canopy.

4. The Black Adviser Reaches Out

DAYS later, a letter was issued quickly by the royal advisory office under the direction of Lord Otto, appointing Clovis officially as an adviser. Following that, Alicia also drew up a letter to appoint him as an adviser to the princess.

And thus, Alicia found herself attending Clovis's appointment ceremony.

Many members of the Privy Council don't seem to be present. Maybe because it was such short notice?

Alicia sat beside the king in a deep blue gown and looked quizzically at the rows of red chairs, which should have been filled with people.

Appointment ceremonies of importance were usually held in the audience chamber, where a huge chandelier hung from the ceiling. The Privy Council—made up of ministers from the various ministries and the heads of influential noble families that governed the major territories—would usually attend as a sign of their approval of the appointments.

However, half of the council was absent today, including the Duke of Sheraford, father of Riddhe Sutherland, the man who was so hostile towards Clovis the other day.

...Does this mean most of the council is against me keeping Clovis at my side?

Alicia's mind replayed the scene of Lord Otto arguing with Riddhe. Back then, Riddhe was harshly critical of the way Lord Otto seemed neglectful of the older noble families.

Alicia shook her head vehemently, dispelling the anxiety she felt. She would not go back on her word now. It was her duty as the princess to take responsibility for her own actions.

Despite everything, the appointment ceremony concluded without a hitch, and Clovis officially became Alicia's adviser. Right after the ceremony, Alicia called for an audience with him.

“Well done, Clovis. How do you feel?” she asked him.

“It was my duty. I am glad to be able to meet with Your Highness like this again.”

Alicia heaved a sigh of relief as Clovis smiled. He had appeared stiff during the ceremony, but now that she was up close, he looked much better compared to when they first met during the recognition ceremony for the inspection squad.

“Well, I know we haven’t really started working together yet, but do you have any questions for me?” Alicia went straight into it, asking the question that had been on her mind.

She’d more or less ordered Clovis to become her adviser, but Alicia still didn’t know much about this man and what he was like in this life. Then again, the same could be said for Clovis. It would be understandable for him to feel anxious, faced with a ten-year-old mistress who didn’t have a clue about anything.

Clovis’s gaze wavered as Alicia looked up at him with her innocent, sky-blue eyes. Then, his thin lips parted slightly. “...If I may ask just one question. Why did you choose me, Your Highness?”

Lord Otto, who was standing behind Clovis, opened his mouth in reproach, but Alicia stopped him with a raised hand. The chief adviser frowned but respected Alicia’s wish and stepped back.

“I owe Your Highness and Lord Nigel a debt that I will never be able to repay in this lifetime. It would be my pleasure to serve under Your Highness. My presence, however, may cast doubt upon your esteemed person,” Clovis continued, averting his eyes from Alicia’s, a hint of pain on his beautiful face.

“The number of empty seats during my appointment ceremony was proof enough,” he continued. “While there may be some who could not attend due to their busy schedules, most who were absent today are conservatives from the older noble families who value strict adherence to established norms... This is their way of silently protesting against someone of Graham’s blood serving the crown.”

Alicia nodded, understanding why Clovis had seemed so stiff during the

ceremony. However, she was more surprised by how the young man had accurately pinpointed the reason behind her vague anxiety during the event.

Even so, Alicia felt that Clovis was a little too fixated on his identity as “Graham’s blood.” Lord Otto would have chalked up the conservative nobles’ absence to the fact that she had failed to choose someone with ties to the council to become her adviser.

“I cannot sully the name of those who have extended a helping hand to me,” Clovis said solemnly. “It is still not too late. If you had taken pity on me—”

“Why would your presence sully my name?” Alicia interrupted Clovis’s speech with a voice as light as a bird’s, earning a puzzled look from the man.

“Because I am of Graham’s blood.”

“And what of it? You’re Clovis Cromwell, aren’t you? Not Zach Graham.”

Alicia thought she’d only stated the obvious, but Clovis’s almond-shaped eyes widened as he stared hard at her.

“...There are not many who see it that way.”

“Is that so? Wasn’t Nigel keen on recommending you to take on an important position?” she reminded him.

Clovis’s mouth opened and closed several times, seemingly at a loss for words. Alicia chuckled, thinking that his perplexed look did not suit his handsome face at all.

Then her expression turned serious again.

“There are those who will never approve of you and those who will use your lineage to attack you the way Riddhe Sutherland did. It must have dredged up unhappy memories, and for that, I sincerely apologize.”

“Your Highness has nothing to apologize for!” Clovis shook his head fiercely as he took a step forward. Alicia’s sky-blue eyes quivered and her breath hitched, but no one seemed to notice. “Cursed blood flows through my veins, and I should have been left to rot away silently. Yet you saved me, Your Highness. From the moment you took my hand, I made the decision to swear fealty to you. I will serve Your Highness with my life.”

Didn't I tell you before that such a remark was a big promise?

Though slightly mortified that Clovis had somehow upgraded his promise from serving her “with his everything” to “with his life,” Alicia was nonetheless glad to see him taking his appointment seriously.

With that, Alicia’s brief audience with her new adviser drew to a close. She later learned that the closest mansion his family owned was over an hour’s carriage ride away from the castle, so Clovis had decided to reside in the dormitory for civil officers built on the grounds of the castle.

Nigel led Clovis out of the small audience chamber. Probably to give him final instructions on his future role, including his place of residence.

Alicia saw them off with a smile, though a single drop of sweat trickled down her forehead. Gently pressing a white lace handkerchief to her forehead, she touched her cheek, wondering if she’d maintained her smile well.

Fortunately, Clovis and Nigel hadn’t noticed anything amiss. To be fair, Alicia had meant every word, and she’d enjoyed their conversation more than she thought she would.

Yet...

Alicia warned herself that she needed to maintain her composure better. Even though she knew that this Clovis was not the one who’d killed her, the image of him furiously thrusting his sword into her flashed through her mind whenever she let her guard down. She’d wanted to make him feel at ease, but her body disobeyed and froze up every time she tried.

I’ll be fine. I can surely change the future.

Recalling her pact with the messenger of the stars, Alicia encouraged herself.



“CLOVIS, will you look over this report for me?”

Seated at the chief adviser’s desk, which overlooked the desks of the thirty or so advisers under his charge, Nigel Otto called upon his newest officer.

It had been about two weeks since Princess Alicia had appointed the exceedingly handsome youth as her personal adviser. Despite being new, he

held an important position, so Nigel had tasked him to research past records as much as he could to help expand his knowledge.

And now he would see if that had borne any fruit.

The other advisers sensed that Nigel was springing a test on Clovis. Discreet but keenly interested glances flitted towards the chief adviser's desk.

After standing beside Nigel, Clovis scrutinized the district council report handed to him and then frowned.

"This is..."

"What do you think?"

It was a report on the income and expenditures of the Marquisate of Rozen, submitted by the district commissioner. Full of complex terminology and numbers, the message was nonetheless clear: the marquis had performed poorly, which warranted the confiscation of his territory.

The Marquis of Rozen was Jude Nicol, a well-known eccentric. Despite being from one of the older, more prestigious houses, he rarely made social appearances or interacted much with the other nobles. Instead, he was often spotted in the port towns, drinking with merchants from the East and singing merrily at bars.

In addition, he was known for selling paintings that were family heirlooms for generations in order to acquire money to expand his collection of oriental porcelain.

Rumor had it that he once commissioned a famous painter, known to be second to none, to draw a portrait, then told the painter, "I can draw velvet and lace better than you." The painter had been so enraged that he requested to withdraw from the commission.

He'd even been cut off by merchants known to be friendly with other nobles and his forefathers because he didn't see eye to eye with them.

Clovis must have been aware of everything going on around the notorious marquis. Therefore, the proposals in the report should serve as the smoking gun needed to punish the man.

Clovis finished reading the report as Nigel waited patiently, then narrowed his eyes in confusion. “These are terrible accusations. Can we send this back to the district council?”

“What do you mean?” At Nigel’s prompting, Clovis flipped through the report and pointed to a table.

“Please take a look at this report on the taxes of the Marquisate of Rozen over the last ten years. Tax revenues have been decreasing since Lord Nicol took over as head of his house.”

The black-haired youth shrugged in indignation.

“However, in the first three years after he inherited the territory, the North, including the Marquisate of Rozen, was devastated by a severe cold wave, which resulted in crop failure. To put it bluntly, it is unreasonable to compare the marquisate’s tax revenues to the southern territories, which weren’t affected as much by the cold wave.”

A fellow adviser let out a low whistle, impressed that Clovis had accurately brought up the relevance of the cold wave and its effects, which happened over five years ago, without the need to refer to any records.

Nigel himself was pleased with Clovis’s answer, though he continued his prompt. “What are your thoughts on Jude Nicol, then?”

“We have never met in person, so this is just speculation...” Clovis paused, a slim finger on his chin, as if choosing his next words with care. “It is true that there are many rumors of Lord Rozen being an eccentric. However, the records from the Ministry of Justice show that the Marquisate of Rozen is peaceful and its citizens are happy. Perhaps that is proof enough that the marquis is governing his territory well?”

“You pass.”

Clovis was baffled by Nigel’s words, and the chief adviser gave him a wry smile.

“I apologize for springing this test on you. Truthfully, district commissioner Dreyfus is quite troublesome. He doesn’t get along with Lord Rozen, and ever since his bid to join the advisory office was rejected, he has been sending such

reports to us regularly.”

But thanks to that, Nigel had the perfect test to check if his advisers had the essential skills needed to make fair judgments backed by extensive knowledge.

The other advisers present, who had paused and listened eagerly to the exchange, grumbled.

“Lord Nigel can be so mean.”

“He showed me the same report too, and I gave a lousy answer.”

“I unwittingly agreed with the report, and the seniors won’t stop teasing me about it.”

Clovis looked at everyone with wide eyes as Nigel gave two loud claps.

“Now that there’s a new superstar here, you guys can’t afford to slack off anymore. Come, come, who will be the first to submit their report to me?”

“Whoa, how scary.”

“Well done, newbie. You may be impressive, but we won’t be beaten.”

The senior advisers came over to Clovis to offer good-natured pats on the back and shoulders. The youth seemed at a loss of what to do, but there was a slight flush of happiness on his cheeks.

This is a good sign.

Hands folded, Nigel watched with a small smile, his wise blue eyes narrowing in amusement.

He had always made it a point to select his advisers based on merit. When he was first appointed as chief adviser, he dismissed any officers who had gotten the appointment through family ties and lineage alone, replacing them with passionate individuals with a thirst for knowledge and an eagerness to serve the king and country.

This went against the established norms in Heilland. In particular, he made enemies of the older noble houses, which had their family members kicked out of the advisory office, and they saw his doings as disruptions to the kingdom’s peace and order.

However, Nigel remained steadfast in his beliefs. No matter what enemies he made, he knew that recruiting talented individuals would only do Heilland good. It was clear just by looking at the other kingdoms that nobody appointed officials based solely on lineage anymore.

A glaring example of that would be their neighbor, Erdal. Although they were founded later than Heilland, they became global influencers in the areas of economics, military, and politics. That was due in large part to the fact that Erdal not only protected their merchant class but also supported their rise instead of keeping them at a lower social rank.

According to the inspection squad's reports, Erdal's nobility was no longer a privileged class with unfounded power. The common people were eager for education, and talented individuals could rise up and earn fortunes. As a result, commoners, merchants, and newly minted nobles alike all worked hard, bolstered by dreams unhindered by social class. Even the older noble houses fulfilled their duties diligently, not wanting to lose out.

Fortunately, due to Nigel's reforms, the current members of the advisory office were fair-minded individuals who made decisions without regard for houses or lineage. That said, Nigel was still worried that they would find it hard to accept Clovis. However, the seniors acknowledged the new adviser's capabilities without complaint.

Clovis himself had seemed stiff and tense at first, afraid of how the others would react to his background. Now, he looked relaxed among the other advisers. And as the initial excitement at his appointment faded, he was also becoming more quick-witted.

Nigel was speechless at how the youth had distinguished himself so well after just two weeks, and he silently thanked the young princess in his heart for taking Clovis's hand and keeping him with them.

Your Highness, you may very well have picked up an extraordinary one.

The princess might still be an innocent and lovely girl, but she had somehow developed the sense to gauge someone's qualities accurately. Content, Nigel turned back to his mountain of work.



PRINCESS Alicia's days were hectic.

She took lessons in etiquette, dance, embroidery, history, theology, literature, astronomy, medicine, current affairs, *etc.* To become queen, she needed to be well-versed in a wide variety of subjects.

She had a specific tutor for each subject who came to instruct her one after the other, following a meticulous schedule planned out down to the second. It was a chaotic and restrictive life for a ten-year-old girl.

As heir to the throne, Alicia used to suffer through her many subjects. For example, the more she learned about history, the more aware she became of how unlikely it would be for her to become Heiland's ruling queen. If she was not going to inherit the throne anyway, wouldn't it be more fun to throw away her boring books and run around in the garden?

But after she regained memories of the night of the revolution, Alicia changed, taking her studies seriously. When she shared her earnest wish to study hard, her history tutor's mouth dropped open in shock, and her literature tutor burst into grateful tears.

That said, it was difficult to change. She had never been serious with her studies, and even though she tried to pay attention now, the lack of knowledge she should have learned before made her current studies seem like gibberish.

"I don't want to think about anything anymore..." she grumbled.

"You did well today, Your Highness. Let me pour you some sweet tea."

The small princess was slumped over her table after a full day of lessons, earning a look of sympathy from her maid Annie, who had just brought a tea set into the room.

"Aren't you going to skip classes like you used to do?" the maid asked as she glanced at Alicia, pouring some black tea into a cup. The fragrant aroma of the tea reached Alicia's nose, and she sniffed and tilted her head to one side.

"Is it that strange that I want to take my studies seriously?" she asked her maid.

"To be fair, it seems like just yesterday when you were so against studying.

We used to have such fun playing tag around the castle.”

Annie grinned, being honest without a trace of hesitation. As an only child, Alicia saw Annie as a dependable older sister. Annie probably sensed that as well, for she doted on Alicia in a way that transcended their mistress-servant relationship.

“I’m worried that Your Highness’s sudden change will cause you to neglect your health. Your sleep doesn’t seem as restful these days... Is something troubling you, Your Highness?”

A chill ran through Alicia at Annie’s astute observation.

After her meeting with the messenger of the stars, Alicia worked hard to catch up on her studies, hoping to glean more information about her situation. She was lucky to have found Clovis and kept him close, but that didn’t mean that their relationship would stay amicable in the future.

After analyzing the events of the night of the revolution, Alicia knew that the biggest problem she had to tackle was the war with their neighbor, Erdal. The war that would result in King James’s death, the subjugation of their kingdom, and eventually the revolution.

To change the future, Alicia needed to prevent the death of her beloved father, which meant avoiding the upcoming war with Erdal at all costs. That was why Alicia had devoted herself so earnestly to her studies.

Of course, there was no way she could tell anyone any of this. Not even Annie, whom she loved like a sister.

“...Nothing in particular. I just thought it was about time I took things seriously.” Alicia’s response was flimsy, but Annie didn’t probe further. She had to be full of doubt, even as she placed the tea and pastries silently before Alicia.

The sweet fragrance of the tea tickled Alicia’s nose. Annie must have brewed it just the way she liked it, and the thought of it made Alicia want to burst into tears. Whether she sensed the princess’s distress or not, Annie quietly moved closer to her.

“Th-Thank you for the tea,” Alicia said.

“Please enjoy.”

Alicia wiped away the tears and was about to take a sip when a knock sounded on the door.



“**YOU** look tired. Would you like me to give a consolidated report tomorrow instead?”

Alicia shook her head, her sky-blue hair flowing, and smiled at Clovis, who was seated across from her. “Don’t worry, I’m fine. Just tell me how today went.”

They had agreed that every day when he was on duty, Clovis would come to her in the evening and report on his activities for the day, as per Lord Otto’s suggestion.

Such daily meetings between a royal and their adviser were the norm, but since Alicia didn’t have many official duties, there wasn’t actually a need for them. That said, communication was key to building a relationship of trust, so the two had agreed to do the meetings anyway.

Alicia felt bad for making someone almost ten years her senior waste their time like this when there was no need to, and she wondered if Clovis found it bothersome. However, she was surprised when the adviser insisted on the meetings.

Not only did he show no reluctance, but he also seemed strangely eager to come, though his expression always remained calm and collected. So Alicia just accepted it. And if she sometimes likened her handsome adviser to a large dog with a beautiful coat of black fur, she was sure no one would blame her.

There was a cup of tea before Clovis as well, prepared by Annie. His wasn’t as sweet as Alicia’s. After taking a sip at Alicia’s insistence, he slowly lifted his head.

“Lord Nigel gave me a test today,” he said.

“Test? What kind of test?”

Alicia grimaced, recalling the bundles of parchment her tutors would bring to her lessons. However, Clovis’s account was different from what she’d imagined.

“So, you had to deduce that the report was full of rubbish based on what you knew without any data to refer to?” she said.

“I was lucky. It just so happened that I was looking through the relevant records.”

Her young adviser didn’t seem fazed, but Alicia knew that it was rare for anyone to make accurate deductions as Clovis had done, given the same amount of time and documents to prepare. The ability to recall relevant information as needed was more important than the ability to memorize everything.

“Oh, if only I were half as clever as you, Clovis,” she said enviously.

“Your Highness?” Clovis blinked as Alicia faceplanted onto her table again. Then, noticing numerous thick books piled up in front of his young mistress, he seemed to understand. “Are you exhausted from your studies?”

“This is karma for Her Highness’s past laziness.”

Alicia pouted cutely at Annie’s heartless jibe, causing Clovis to give an exasperated smile.

The first time Annie had spoken bluntly to Alicia, Clovis had shot the maid a black look, misinterpreting her teasing as disrespect towards their mistress. Alicia had been taken aback. It was only after plenty of explanations about how Alicia saw Annie as an older sister and cherished her for her honesty that the young adviser finally seemed convinced.

“Lord Clovis might not know this, but our princess is known for her dislike of studying,” Annie said with a wiggle of her finger. “All it took was a shout of ‘The princess has run away!’ and all us maids had to go chasing after her... Though this hasn’t happened since your appointment.”

“Is that so? It’s only natural that Her Highness is intelligent enough to realize the importance of her education and has decided to take things seriously. I may not have been here long, but I can immediately sense her eagerness,” Clovis attested.

The sight of her two trusted retainers engaging in a tough verbal battle while keeping pristine smiles was something that Alicia had gotten used to over the

past few weeks.

“I see now. Is Your Highness having trouble taking in new knowledge because of a lack of foundation?” Deep in thought, Clovis stood and picked up a thick book from Alicia’s table, then flipped through its pages. He looked every bit like an artist’s model or a royal, his slim fingers turning the pages and his focused expression painting an attractive picture.

Ever since Clovis had become Alicia’s adviser, the women working in the castle had become enamored with him. Young ladies-in-waiting loitered near the advisory office, squealing whenever they caught sight of him and giving Lady Fourier a mighty headache.

Once we grow closer, I’ll try asking him his thoughts on romance. Alicia’s secret plans ran rampant in her mind while she kept a straight face.

The book Clovis had picked up was a history book about their kingdom, compiled from a collection of old records. After a quick scan over the small print, the black-haired youth looked back up at Alicia.

“I may not be as knowledgeable as your tutors, but I may be able to help Your Highness out a little with history and current affairs.”

“Really?!”

Clovis smiled and nodded. “The Royal Academy hammered knowledge of general affairs into me. As long as I can supplement that with these books, I should be able to provide some support.”

“Your help will mean the world to me, Clovis!” Alicia exclaimed. “Don’t you agree, Annie?!”

“Of course.”

Despite Annie’s stilted reply, Alicia bombarded her adviser-turned-tutor with a series of questions.



DARK. It was so dark.

She was alone, floating in a cold, bottomless ocean.

The feeling of water clinging to her skin was heavy and freezing, sapping all strength from her small body. Alicia opened her mouth to breathe, only to choke as air bubbles escaped from her throat.

Where was she?

Where was her father? Lady Fourier? Annie?

Everyone had left her and gone far away.

An orange light flickered beyond the swirling wall of water before her. In the blink of an eye, the light expanded into a large circle, enveloping Alicia without warmth.

“Kill those Erdalian dogs!!”

“Kill the ones who have dishonored Heiland’s pride!!”

Voices from the mob echoed through the water, accompanied by the flicker of flames.

She was cold. Frightened. She didn’t want to hear anymore.

No matter how she twisted her body away and covered her ears, the distant shouts reverberated and echoed through the water again and again.

The water grew denser, and Alicia felt herself being surrounded by hate. When she lifted her face, terrified, she saw Clovis Cromwell surrounded by a blaze of fire, his eyes swirling black pools of rage and hatred.

A scream slipped from Alicia’s constricted throat, soundless as it disappeared in a stream of bubbles.

Gone were the grateful smile, eyes filled with tears, and the blush upon receiving praise from others. He stared at Alicia calmly, like a black god of death. The sword glinted dimly in his grip, and he turned to run.

Dense water held her back, trapping her the more she struggled. Before she knew it, the black god of death stood before her, glaring down at her with contempt.

Clovis, stop.

Tears fell from Alicia’s wide eyes as Clovis lifted his sword. Her heartbreaking

pleas fell on deaf ears.

Violet eyes burning with hate, Clovis Cromwell swung his sword down.



“STOP!!!”

Alicia jolted awake, her scream echoing throughout her chambers.

Her chest heaved, and her heart pounded wildly. Sweat poured down her forehead, back, and everywhere else. With a harsh breath, she sat up, exhausted, and clutched at her head beneath her disheveled hair.

How many times had she had that same dream, only to wake up to the sound of her own screams?

“...Your Highness?”

A quiet knock accompanied her maid’s voice through the door. Alicia swallowed hard.

“...It is quite late, Annie. Is something the matter?”

It took many deep breaths for Alicia to calm her tone. Annie remained silent for a long moment and then called back in a gentle voice.

“I thought I heard Your Highness call out. Shall I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine. You should go back to bed, Annie.”

“Understood. Good night, Your Highness.”

The maid’s footsteps faded as she left. After making sure that she was no longer within earshot, Alicia fell back onto her bed, exhausted.

This happened every night. Ever since she dreamt of the messenger of the stars, Alicia had been plagued by the same nightmare. While the nightmare always left the young ten-year-old mentally exhausted, Alicia was more annoyed than anything else.

Clovis... I’m sorry for seeing you that way.

She forced herself to remember his beautiful profile as they sat side by side, poring over history books, with him explaining her mistakes to her in detail.

He had only been her retainer for a short while, but Alicia found herself falling for her new dark-haired adviser. No matter how many times she was confronted with the horrific scenes from her previous life, she woke to remember this Clovis, earnestly serving her with all he had.

Maybe it was because of his special circumstances, but Clovis seemed to have pledged deep loyalty to Alicia the moment she took his hand. He had placed so much trust in her, and he would be devastated to learn that Alicia did not feel the same.

I'll be fine. I can change the future. I can do it. I can do it. I can do it.

Closing her eyes, Alicia whispered the words to herself like a mantra.



AFTER the death of Heilland's sixth king, Joffrey II, two princes tore the kingdom apart in their fight for the throne.

One was Crown Prince Edgar, Joffrey II's eldest son. The other was Prince Julius, son of King John, Heilland's fifth king, and brother of Joffrey II.

The princes were equally matched in terms of military strength, intellect, capability, and lineage, and their war split the kingdom's nobles into two camps. The war between the cousins lasted about fifteen years and was later named the "Two-Headed War," a reference to how both princes had a legitimate claim to the throne.

In the end, it was Crown Prince Edgar who inherited the throne after the successful seizure of Egdiel Castle. Unfortunately, Prince Julius wasn't one to give up easily.

Though he was driven into lands relinquished by the founding father, King Estel, Julius held onto the wealth and prosperity accumulated during his time as the Marquis of Chester, and he rose and became the leader of a number of feudal lords thanks to his formidable ingenuity and military prowess. Then he renamed himself Julius the Conqueror and founded the Erdal Empire.

The Two-Headed War thus served as a point of contention, and countless wars continued to be fought between the two countries over who was considered the rightful ruler of Heilland.

“But with time, the two royal families slowly started to compromise. Finally, during Henry VII’s time, the countries established amicable ties in the form of a marriage... Yes, you have understood this well, Cia.”

King James blinked his almond-colored eyes as he looked up from the report Alicia wrote to organize her thoughts. They were in the middle of dinner, but the king had caught wind of Alicia’s fervor towards her studies and had requested to view her work.

“An excellent tutor taught me this during a special lesson,” she boasted.

“Oh, so Clovis helped you with it. I’ll have to personally give him my thanks,” King James teased with a good-natured smile, which Alicia returned before spooning soup into her mouth.

The reason behind Alicia’s research into the Erdal Empire had everything to do with her previous life. The night of the revolution was linked to Erdal in two important ways.

First, another war broke out between Heilland and the Erdal Empire. King James lost his life as a result, and Heilland was defeated.

Second, Alicia had to marry Prince Fritz as part of the peace treaty. This resulted in Fritz ascending to the throne of Heilland as its next king.

Considering these points and the history of conflict between the two countries, it was possible that sometime in the near future, a war would be instigated by yet another argument over who was the rightful descendant of Heilland’s founding father.

“Father, do you think that we’ll have to go to war with Erdal again?”

Alicia tried to keep her tone light, but King James froze, a spoon of soup halfway to his mouth. Quietly putting the spoon down and dabbing at his mouth with a napkin, the king turned towards Alicia.

“As much as I’d like to say no... The future is never certain.”

“But Grandmother is part of Heilland now, isn’t she?”

The king nodded solemnly at Alicia’s insistence. “As you said, Cia, Erdal is your grandmother’s homeland, and your grandfather’s dearest wish was for us to

remain amicable. Personally, I do not plan on seeing any blood spilled by going to war with a neighbor who shares our roots. That said, friendship can only be forged when both parties are willing.”

“So Erdal may break their promise?”

“Let us finish our soup before it gets cold,” King James chided, and Alicia resumed her meal.

As soon as she finished her soup, the servers cleared the table. While waiting for the next course, King James spoke again.

“Do you know of Elizabeth, the Empress of Erdal? I don’t think you’ve had the chance to meet her.”

“I often hear of her. She’s very smart, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She is knowledgeable, dignified... And also a fierce woman capable of ruling the whole empire.”

Empress Elizabeth.

There were none who did not know her name.

Despite being King James’s cousin by blood, she was never in line to succeed the throne. That was because Elizabeth’s mother wasn’t the queen consort.

There were many dark rumors surrounding how Elizabeth, the king’s daughter with a mistress, inherited the throne to become Empress. One theory claimed that she had poisoned the queen consort’s child, while another insisted that she had them framed for a crime and imprisoned. Now that she was ruling the empire with an iron fist, no one dared to come forward to reveal the truth.

“Beth is passionate about instilling order in her country, so war shouldn’t be on her mind. However, should Heiland capture her interest, she would surely invade without mercy. When that happens, I will have to protect this country as its king.”

“...If I marry the crown prince of Erdal, will that be enough to prevent war?” Alicia asked.

Annie, who was standing by the door, widened her eyes in shock. She gazed upon her mistress with worry, her lips tight and her face tense as Alicia waited

for her father's answer.

However, King James reached out a chubby hand and patted Alicia on the head.

"Father?"

"It seems like my dear Cia has become aware of her role as the princess."

Servers placed the next course before the king and princess. King James smiled as he brought a forkful of fish poêlé to his lips. The sight made Alicia notice her hunger, and despite her worries, she dug into the tender fish as well.

"To tell the truth, Beth has asked multiple times for the two of you to be introduced."

"That means..."

"Yes. She probably means to have the two of you betrothed. Thus far, I have politely declined every time, sending my apologies along with plenty of that tart red wine that Beth loves, of course."

Alicia's mouth hung open in shock as King James held up two chubby fingers.

"I have two reasons for my refusal. First, if you marry Prince Fritz, he will become the next king of Heilland. However, he is also first in line to Erdal's throne. No matter how friendly our countries might be with each other, such a situation would incite a violent reaction from both the nobility and commoners."

With that, King James shrugged.

"Not that Beth would be ready to hand over her throne to her son for at least a few more decades... Second... If you continue to work hard, I'll tell you my second reason someday, hm?"

"Work hard? You mean at my studies?"

"That too, but also to think about things, stick to what you know is right, and take on challenges. And when you've demonstrated your capability to me, I will tell you."

With that cryptic answer, the king turned his attention back to his food. As he

smiled and praised the delicious fish, it was obvious that he no longer wished to continue the conversation.

Reluctantly, Alicia huffed and spooned more fish into her mouth.



THE depths of water were heavy and cold, and clung to her body.

Curses rang out in the distance, turning into orange flames and preventing her escape.

The black god of death brought furious judgment upon her.

Once again, she woke up screaming.



ARGH! *At this rate, I'll never be able to change the future.*

It was a rare afternoon with nothing planned in her schedule. Alicia sat in the narrow space between the castle crenelations, legs drawn up against her chest, chin resting on her knees.

With a little help from Clovis, she'd somehow survived her tutors' endlessly long lessons and even gathered some information.

However, she'd failed to uncover any reason why Heiland would start a war with Erdal. That meant that there was a high chance that Empress Elizabeth would make the decision to go to war. How was a ten-year-old girl supposed to prevent that?

Eyes closed, she recalled that beautiful, otherworldly youth and felt disgruntled.

Dear messenger... Aren't you just a little unkind to leave me floundering like this?

"Your Highness?!"

A gasp sounded from behind her. Alicia started; she'd thought she was alone, then turned around to see Clovis with a taut expression.

"Oh, it's you, Clovis. What are you doing up here?"

“I was just about to head to the Ministry of Justice with the other advisers... But that’s not the point!”

Alicia looked over her adviser’s shoulder to see several officers standing in the corridor. As she tilted her body to get a better look, Clovis stepped towards her, flustered, unlike his usual calm self.

“Your Highness, please get down from there right away. What if a gust of wind causes you to lose your balance and fall?!”

“Fall? I’m not that clumsy. Besides, the wind is gentle and the sky is so warm today.”

“That’s not really...!”

“Oi, Clovis. We’re leaving already—”

“Huh?! What?!”

Clovis gawked at his colleagues as they waved goodbye. Alicia was amused to see her calm and collected adviser so strangely distraught, and she shrugged when he looked back at her.

“Everyone’s used to seeing me sit here,” she told him. “After all, it’s my favorite spot. I come here all the time.”

“So, you mean you engage in such dangerous behavior all the time...?”

Alicia had meant to calm him down, but her words only upset Clovis even more, as he pressed a hand to his temple with a heavy sigh. Then, as if making up his mind about something, he walked over and leaned against the wall right next to Alicia.

“I have decided. I will not move from this spot until Your Highness comes down.”

“Erm, don’t you need to go somewhere with the other advisers?”

“They are only going to retrieve documents. Protecting Your Highness’s life is far more important.”

“...Aren’t you being a bit overprotective?”

“Nothing Your Highness says will change my mind. I am not leaving.”

Clovis stared at Alicia with narrowed eyes, and she knew that he would stay true to his word and not budge until she got down from her perch.

There went her chance for quiet contemplation. Alicia turned to step back down to the floor, knowing that she wasn't going to win against her adviser this time. Clovis's eyes shifted to the scenery Alicia was gazing upon, and they widened slightly.

"You can see the entire town from here... This castle is truly a well-designed military base," he whispered in awe.

"The view is amazing, isn't it?" she agreed. "You can see the people, the mansions in the suburbs, the Eram River flowing through the city, and the lush green forests beyond. You can really see far on clear days like this. Makes you feel like you can see the whole kingdom."



“I think I understand Your Highness’s point now.”

Alicia puffed out her chest with pride as her young adviser admired the scenery. Then she pointed out various buildings, showing off her knowledge of the castle town.

“That red roof over there belongs to a bakery popular with the townsfolk. Their pastries always sell out so fast. And that orange roof is Madame Elza’s tailor shop. When the high society season comes around, Madame is always busy working from morning till night.”

“Hmm, Your Highness knows a lot.”

“Also, have you ever seen the lanterns floating down the Eram River? It’s pretty when all the lights dye the water orange. Oh! During the next Star Festival, let’s...”

The words stuck in Alicia’s throat. She had died on the night of the Star Festival.

Clovis tilted his head at his mistress’s sudden silence, though he chose not to probe further, turning his gaze back towards the castle town.

“Have you been to the town, Your Highness? You sound like you know the place well, so I was wondering if you had been there sometime for an inspection...”

“Oh, no. Actually, I learned all of it from the maids. I’ve never left this castle in my life.”

Thankful that the conversation had smoothly transitioned to another topic, Alicia regained her composure and shook her head. Clovis turned back to her in shock.

“Not even once?”

“No. I’ve never even been to my grandfather and grandmother’s Eastern villa. Lady Fourier always says that a princess should not leave the castle or show her face to commoners without good reason.”

In the past, Alicia would wander the castle grounds whenever she ran away from her lessons. She would visit the training hall of the palace knights or head

over to the civil servants' offices to look for people to talk to.

Everyone in the castle doted on the friendly and playful princess with her sparkling sky-blue eyes. Those whom she visited would often prepare snacks for her or hide her from the searching maids.

According to Lady Fourier, should Alicia be given the chance to visit the castle town, she would surely behave in the same manner and lose all dignity as the princess.

"To be honest, Lady Fourier doesn't like that I'm so friendly with the castle staff, though she's probably given up trying to get me to change," Alicia said.

"...I don't know much about court etiquette. However, I personally think it is good that a monarch is close to the people they rule." Then, as if realizing what he'd just said, Clovis slapped a hand over his mouth. "I am extremely sorry! I have overstepped my bounds."

"It's okay. In fact, can you tell me why you think that?" Intrigued, Alicia focused her sky-blue eyes on Clovis. The youth coughed, trying to regain his composure.

"...In the long run, such good relations will become a source of power for the kingdom." Clovis looked at the castle town before continuing. "Overwhelming power and charisma are two ways a king can win over his people. However, if the monarch and common people are united by trust, and everyone improves the country in their own way, the result is a much greater strength than if the king had held all the power by himself."

"Is this what you meant when you proposed to... Erm... To 'abolish the appointment of ranks based on social standing'?"

The young adviser looked at Alicia with amazement, impressed that she recalled the contents of his report about Erdal.

"Did Your Highness read through my report too?"

"No. I begged Father to show me, but it was too complicated, and I couldn't understand it. Since then, I've been waiting for a chance to ask you in person."

Clovis's cheeks reddened at Alicia's words. "What you said is true. It is hard to

bring about reform with the wisdom of just a few individuals... Either way, I thought my report would be ignored, so I just threw out an honest proposal.”

Apparently, Clovis had been ready to receive the king’s wrath for his proposals. But contrary to anyone’s expectations, King James had found the proposal interesting, calling it an “ideal goal” to work towards, and had even looked favorably upon the two young nobles who suggested it.

His visionary mind was exactly the reason why her beloved father was known as the wise king.

“The monarch and common people united by trust...” Alicia murmured.

The hollers of the frenzied mob echoed again in Alicia’s mind, pestering her relentlessly. With torches and weapons in hand, they had called for bloody murder. There was no trust between them and King Fritz.

And the same could be said for Alicia as well.

“I wonder what the people think of me,” she whispered.

A gentle breeze guided Alicia’s sky-blue strands in a dance around her face. Next to her, Clovis stared in awe at her mature profile. With a melancholic expression as she looked down at the town, she slowly shook her head.

“I’m afraid of the world outside. They are my people, and I should protect them, yet...”

“Your Highness?”

“But I can’t be like this, or I’ll be a failure of a princess.”

Her forced smile came out weaker than she’d intended. Beside her, Clovis’s mouth tightened with frustration.



“**YOUR** Highness, it’s rare for you to get a day free. Are you sure you want to keep studying?”

After bidding Clovis goodbye, Alicia stopped by her chambers on her way to do more research at the library. There she bumped into her two maids, Annie and Martha, who had the small princess cornered and made her take a seat on

the bed.

“Erm... Am I not allowed to?”

“You are not allowed,” was the unanimous response.

Alicia gave a wry smile as she looked at the two maids standing before her. “I’m used to being lectured by Lady Fourier for skipping classes, but this is my first time being scolded for studying.”

“But you have been working too hard recently, Your Highness,” Annie complained as she rolled her eyes, hands on her hips.

“You look so pale these days, and there are big bags under your eyes. At this rate, you’ll collapse from exhaustion...” Martha added, nodding vigorously, her braids swinging with the action.

“Do I really look that tired?”

“Yes, you do.”

Another unanimous answer. Alicia hung her head. While she was glad that her maids were honest with her, she wished they would cushion their words a little for her sake.

“Anyway, please refrain from visiting the library today. It is your rest day, after all. It’s not wrong to take a break once in a while.”

“I guess...”

Alicia leaned against the bed, looking up at her maids. She thought she’d already taken a break, as Annie put it, when she went up to the rooftops to feel the wind and get a breath of fresh air.

“That’s right!” Martha clapped her hands together, a smile on her face. “Your Highness should do what you do best. Play tag! It’s been a long time since you ran away from us. How about a game where we run around the castle and get some exercise? I’m sure it will make you feel refreshed!”

“Huh? That’s not a good idea.” Annie glared at her partner’s easy suggestion. “Her Highness is already tired, and we want her to rest on her day off. Playing tag? That’s preposterous...”

“I think it’s a good idea. I haven’t done any running in a while now.” Alicia leaped off her bed and smiled at Annie, who stood blocking her way.

“Your Highness!”

“It’s true that my body is getting weaker from sitting around and reading,” Alicia said. “I’ve not seen everyone around the castle, either. Maybe they have lots of snacks ready for me.”

“Well, you can just walk to see them, can’t you?”

“That’s no fun. If you’re that worried about me, then you have to catch me first,” Alicia challenged with a wink.

“...That’s how it is, then?”

Annie returned the smile as she rolled up her sleeves and stood tall; her demeanor completely changed. However, she was no match for Alicia, who quickly slipped between her maids.

“Your Highness!”

“Sorry. You won’t catch me!”

That day, cries of “The princess has escaped!” rang through the castle once again, making their way to the kitchens, the knights’ training hall, the library, and finally...

“And here I was, thinking Her Highness was finally becoming more mature...”

Lady Fourier let out a long sigh. How inexcusable to have the kingdom’s royal lady dashing energetically around the castle!

Then, she issued the order for all ladies-in-waiting and maids who were not preoccupied with tasks to chase after the princess and for anyone who saw her to make it their top priority to secure the child.



“**CIA** has escaped? But she doesn’t have lessons this afternoon, does she?”

As he sat in his office at a desk piled high with papers, King James cocked his head to the side. Nigel, who’d brought the news to the king, just smiled in response.

“She is a lively girl. Maybe she wants to spread her wings and enjoy her rare day off.”

“Good. Children should be lively, though Anri’s Iron Mask must be a sight to behold now.”

“Indeed.”

The men grinned at the image of Lady Fourier frantically trying to catch the princess, though the smile on the chief adviser’s face quickly faded.

“Your Majesty, what do you plan to do about that person and Her Highness?”

The king’s answer gave nothing away, as he responded with a noncommittal shrug. “Who knows? It’s impossible to predict an unpredictable future. Even as king, I cannot presume that everything will happen according to my will... Oh, look, it’s Cia! There she goes!”

Nigel sighed and turned his eyes back to his papers, double-checking the reports written for the king while King James gushed about how cute his daughter looked while running and hiding.



“**DID** you see the princess?!”

“She’s not here!”

Annie and Martha ran all around the castle searching for the princess, but Alicia was quick to evade them, and they’d lost sight of her quite a while ago.

“How about the kitchens? Is the chef hiding her?”

“He said she’d already dropped by and left after he gave her pastries. There was even an empty teacup left, so I think he was telling the truth,” Martha explained, flustered.

Annie crossed her arms and thought.

The knights at the training hall had been happy to report that their lovely princess had come to visit and play again.

The librarian had recalled how the sight of the princess squeezing herself between the bookshelves in an attempt to hide made him smile.

Now, the bearded chef had grinned and shared how he and the princess had taken some tea together.

“...Seriously, all the staff are too soft on her.”

The irony of that comment was lost on them as the two maids nodded to each other and dashed off again in search of Alicia.



HIDING here and there and receiving warm welcomes wherever she went, the blue-haired princess was still at large. Reports of her antics spread through the castle until they finally reached the office.

“Her Highness has escaped?”

“Yes. Is she here?” Lady Fourier panted as she entered the advisory office.

Clovis blinked, staring at her. She nudged the tall youth aside and peered around the office.

“Ah, so you are not aware. The princess often enjoys making the maids play tag with her, though she only does it when she is trying to skip classes.”

“So I heard from Lady Annie. But isn’t this afternoon her day off?” Clovis asked.

“...Guess she’s not here. The princess seems to be fond of you, so she may pop over sometime. When she does, please catch her for us. Understood?”

Without waiting for his response, Lady Fourier left like a storm.

Alone again, the adviser paced about his desk restlessly. Soon, he made up his mind and dashed out of the office.



NICE. *I think they’re gone.*

Poking her head around a pillar, Alicia scanned her surroundings. A moment ago, multiple footsteps running about echoed around the area, but it had gone quiet.

After making sure she was safe, Alicia patted her bulging cloth bag and smiled.

It had been a long while since the chef and knights of the Imperial Guard had seen Alicia, and they had been ecstatic. Thanks to that, her bag was stuffed full of baked pastries, safely wrapped up in her lace handkerchief.

Maybe I should visit them more often.

Alicia's heart was full as she skipped along, her mood light. She was grateful for Martha's suggestion to get some exercise.

Buoyant as she was, Alicia didn't realize where she was going, her mind filled only with thoughts of finding a place to sit and enjoy her pastries. But as soon as she rounded the corner, Alicia froze.

Her heart drummed sporadically, and her body was paralyzed as if she were bound. This was a place she'd subconsciously tried to avoid ever since that night.

"The Hall of Time..."

Milky-white bronze statues with deeply chiseled features stood in rows down the silent corridor. Simply decorated and majestic, it looked exactly like she remembered.

Her heart palpitated in her chest.

Hyperventilating, she struggled for air.

This was bad.

She had to leave.

Just when she was about to turn around, something clunked on the marble floor.

She whipped her gaze around. Her mind went blank.

The dim light from outside illuminated someone standing at the end of the chilly corridor. Someone with jet-black hair, a terrifyingly beautiful face, a tall, well-proportioned frame...

And cold violet eyes that pierced through Alicia.

"Clovis Cromwell..."

Her hoarse voice squeezed its way out of her parched throat. Her body

trembled, and her face drained of blood.

“No.”

The black god of death stepped towards Alicia. She was still frozen.

“No, no.”

His almond-shaped eyes stared coolly at her, burning with contempt and hatred.

“No, no no no.”

He raised his arm. The dull glint of his sword was ready to bring down judgment upon Alicia.

“NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!”

“Your Highness?!”

“Please breathe, Your Highness!!”

Alicia screamed, frantic. Before she knew it, her two trusted maids and Lady Fourier were restraining her.

“Annie, Martha...? Lady Fourier...?”

The three women exchanged looks of worry and slight confusion. The haze in Alicia’s mind finally cleared, and she noticed the hot tears running down her cheeks and the bag full of pastries on the floor.

And, at the edge of her hazy vision, the one she was looking for.

“Clovis...”

A distance away from the three ladies and Alicia, the young adviser’s expression was tense. The last remnants of Alicia’s vision faded away, and the sight of the forlorn, frozen youth took its place. Regret gripped her.

“I-It’s not Clovis’s fault. It’s mine.”

“Please calm down. Calm down, Your Highness.”

“It’s true, Lady Fourier. He has done nothing wrong.”

Alicia clung weakly to Lady Fourier as the lady-in-waiting stroked her back soothingly. Fresh tears streamed from her sky-blue eyes.

“Please. Tell Clovis. Tell him I’m sorry I scared him.”

With a final whispered apology, Alicia fainted.



THE maids carried the princess back to her chambers. At the same time, the medical officers who had been summoned dashed in as well, and Alicia’s rooms were filled with a flurry of activity as everyone bustled in and out.

Clovis leaned against a wall some distance away, not wishing to get in their way.

Quite some time had passed since they’d carried Alicia into her chambers. Unable to peek inside, Clovis had no idea how his mistress was faring.

“It’s not Clovis’s fault. It’s mine.”

He recalled the princess’s voice, desperately defending him even through her pallor and exhaustion. Frustrated, he ran a hand through his dark hair.

Thankfully, Lady Fourier and the maids had witnessed everything, so no one could blame Clovis for what happened.

Therefore, he was free to go and had no reason to linger. However, the image of the unconscious princess wouldn’t leave his mind, and he couldn’t bring himself to return to his room.

“Oh. You’re still here?”

Clovis’s eyes widened at a soft voice. He raised his head.

“Your Majesty...!”

“It’s all right. At ease.”

With a calm hand, King James stopped Clovis before he could stand at attention. The medical staff and maids were making their way out of the princess’s room.

“I heard about the incident from Anri. You must have been shocked.”

“I’m all right... More importantly, Her Highness’s condition—”

“She is sleeping now, though the medical staff are at their wit’s end. The

attending physician couldn't find anything wrong with her and said she is in perfect health. The only explanation he could come up with is that Cia is carrying a heavy mental burden that none of us are aware of."

"Is...that so?"

Clovis's expression darkened, and he lowered his eyes at the king's words.

The way Alicia had shaken with terror in the Hall of Time hadn't seemed natural at all, and what made Clovis's heart clench was the fact that the princess had been, without a doubt, terrified of him.

King James smiled warmly in response to his distressed expression.

"The sun has set. You should get some rest. There is nothing more you can do here for now."

"I cannot do that," Clovis blurted, his head bowed. "Please forgive my rudeness. But would you please allow me to remain here tonight? Even if there is nothing I can do, I want to stay by Her Highness's side to make sure she doesn't suffer anymore."

Clovis couldn't raise his head, fully aware of his powerlessness in the matter. King James gave him a bitter smile.

"I think a pale-faced man standing outside her door all night may end up giving Cia nightmares."

Clovis gulped, not knowing how to respond to the king's playful jest. However, King James shrugged and caught hold of Annie, who was just leaving Alicia's room.

"This man is being stubborn and won't leave. There's no point if he wears himself out and collapses too, so get him a seat by Cia's bedside."

"...Huh?!"

"Your Majesty! That's..."

Annie stared at Clovis with wide eyes, only to see that the man was just as taken aback as she was.

"I don't mind staying here. Her Highness's bedchambers... It's not

appropriate..." Clovis began.

"If I make you stand here all night, Cia will surely be upset with me. I know how loyal you are to Cia, and that is enough to earn my trust."

With a light pat on the dumbfounded Clovis's shoulder, King James walked away. Suddenly, Annie clapped her hands, which snapped Clovis out of his stupor.

"How long are you going to stand there? His Majesty has granted his permission. The doctor's chair is still by Her Highness's bedside, so go in already."

"But I—"

Annie glared at Clovis.

"Come on, decide already! Are you going in or not? Huh?"

"I'll go."

Clovis nodded quickly when the maid pressed him.

He considered refusing, but dismissed the notion. If he chose to leave now, he had a nagging suspicion that he would never find out what Alicia was suffering from.

The princess was kind. Even if he was the reason for her pain, she'd locked up the information tightly in her heart so no one would find out, and she made sure such an incident never happened again.

And he didn't want that.

"I'll go. Could you show me in?" Clovis reaffirmed his decision, carving the resolution into his heart.

Annie gave him a long look, then let out a heavy sigh.

"Understood. Come with me, please. If Her Highness wakes up and panics at the sight of you again, I'd like you to leave immediately. Please keep that in mind."

"Of course. And...thank you."

"There is no need to thank me. I just think the princess would be sad if she

learned that I'd chased you away."

With a final huff, Annie turned and pushed the door open.



WITH a loud pop, a large air bubble escaped from her lips. It quivered and floated upwards.

She was here again. With a resigned demeanor, Alicia gazed upon the dark, bottomless water.

Soon, the faint, wavering orange flames surrounded her. The screams of the revolution echoed with the pulse of the fire.

No more. She couldn't do this again.

Curling her body up, Alicia pressed her hands against her ears.

Memories of her previous life cornered her. Her heart despaired. She was powerless. She would never change the future.

How many more times must she live through this?

Was she ever going to escape it?

A crack resounded. Someone's legs were standing before her. When she raised her face, she locked eyes with Clovis Cromwell, looking down upon her in the same derisive manner as that night.

This time, though, Alicia's heart was free of terror. Instead, her chest was bombarded with pain.

"Hey, Clovis. Why did you kill me?"

The man's handsome features remained stoic as he returned Alicia's gaze, silent. She was reflected in his impassive violet eyes, her face distorted, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Do you still hate me so much that you must kill me?"



EVEN in the darkness, the princess was clearly pale.

Despite that, she remained motionless. Clovis worried that she was stuck in

some deep slumber.

“I need to go help Martha. I’ll be back soon, so please sit here.”

After showing Clovis to Alicia’s bedside, Annie had left with those simple instructions. They were probably busy preparing for a night of vigil by the princess’ bed.

What was he doing? Aside from watching over the sleeping girl and worrying, Clovis was keenly aware of how awkward and useless he was right now.

Silent, Clovis couldn’t bring himself to leave; he was too caught up in feelings of self-deprecation.

Your Highness...

The princess was like no other.

Despite her royal status, she had never been arrogant. In fact, her innocent and friendly nature made it easy for people to forget that she was the kingdom’s crown princess.

How strange that he, Clovis, had been appointed to serve as her personal adviser. When he met her for the first time, he was convinced that they lived in two completely different worlds.

She was the blooming Blue Rose of Heiland. Loved by the king. Cherished by nobility and commoners alike because she was so wonderful and beautiful.

It was the total opposite of what he was.

Grandson of the great sinner, Zach Graham, a rebel who tried to assassinate the queen. Though all portraits depicting his countenance had been burned, the members of the House of Graham remained highly recognizable by their jet-black hair and violet eyes.

Clovis had inherited the great sinner’s physical traits, and had always been abhorred, even by members of his own family. His mother, in particular, hated the sight of him. It reminded her of the shame that befell her House. She often ordered her servants to keep Clovis away.

In search of a way to protect himself, Clovis threw himself into his studies and swordsmanship lessons. Thankfully, he was more skilled than most, and

through a great deal of personal effort, he'd graduated at the top of his class at the Royal Academy.

Not even that changed the way his parents and relatives saw him. In fact, the more Clovis tried to shine, the more people looked down on his origins and worked to bring him down.

He had given up, accepting that he couldn't change anything.

He would never escape the curse that was Zach Graham.

Therefore, Clovis hardly believed it when the princess grabbed his hand during the royal ceremony, convinced that he must be imagining things. Those clear eyes that resembled the sunny sky had looked at him without any hesitation. The way she took his hand, as if guiding him, was so dignified and beautiful.

Before he knew it, he was kneeling in front of the princess, his chest bursting with the utmost joy and his body trembling as he made his decision.

He was born to serve her.

He would devote his everything to serve Princess Alicia.

Your Highness, you saved me that day.

Alicia frowned in her sleep. A pained breath escaped from her parted lips. Her hand twitched, as if searching for something.

After a brief hesitation, Clovis gently wrapped her tiny hand in his own.

He didn't know how to soothe and calm someone in distress.

No one had ever comforted him on nights when he burned up with fever or when he cried from loneliness. Therefore, he had never learned how to comfort or show affection for others.

That had been his life, and he'd never dwelt upon it until now. Stroking the young princess's cold hand, Clovis felt regret for the first time. He didn't know how to help Alicia. If only he'd learned how to interact with others...

And so, he could only pray for his feelings to reach her.

If I could just send some energy to the princess through our joined hands. It

was a stupid wish, but he clung to the thought of it just the same.

Lost in the never-ending darkness, the shining princess had reached out a savior's hand to Clovis.

Now, it was his turn to save her.

Please relieve the princess, my most precious person, of her suffering.

Clovis continued his desperate prayers, unwittingly tightening his grip on Alicia's hand.



“DO you still hate me so much that you must kill me?”

Alicia's question dissolved into the water with a gurgle. Clovis didn't answer, just slowly raised his dimly glinting sword.

I knew it. It is my destiny to die at his hands.

With a defeated sigh, Alicia closed her eyes.

“You look tired. Would you like me to give a consolidated report tomorrow instead?”

“I may be able to help Your Highness out a little with history and current affairs.”

“Your Highness, please get down from there right away. What if a gust of wind causes you to lose your balance and fall?!”

“I, Clovis, will devote everything I have to serving you, Princess Alicia.”

That promise came from her young adviser, as his clear amethyst eyes looked straight at Alicia. She opened her eyes wide.

“You can't kill me.”

A normally cool gaze that could sometimes hold such warmth.

A calm demeanor that hid a youth who often lost his composure.

A perfect superhuman with a shy, fragile side.

In this second chance at life, she'd seen so many other sides of Clovis Cromwell.

The curse of her previous life would no longer deceive her.

“As princess, I command you. Serve by my side. Help me change the future.”

Alicia reached out to her adviser even as he swung his sword down. Her eyes no longer held any fear, just a powerful, dignified light.

“I’ll change the future of the kingdom that mistreated you. This world that you hate. So please, take my hand.”

He stared at Alicia coolly, sword still raised. So she stood up straighter. Reached out more.

“Take my hand, Clovis! My adviser!!”

Suddenly, the dense liquid around her vanished, leaving Alicia surrounded by clear water. Her adviser still stood before her, his cloak flowing in the current. But then he let go of his sword.

Warm light beamed into the claustrophobic world, making the water shimmer like a sparkly veil. Within that endlessly clear, dazzling light, Clovis’s lips slowly lifted in a smile.

That smile was as lovely as the stars in the night sky, as warm as a familiar melody, and as painstakingly gentle as it wrapped around Alicia. She was caught in those deep amethyst eyes, unable to move as his pale, slim fingers gently caressed her own.

Then, their hands joined together tightly, and Alicia woke.



“**YOUR** Highness?”

Alicia blinked, trying to discern her surroundings. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realized that she was lying in bed in her own chambers.

Her right hand felt warm, and she shifted her gaze to look. Slowly, her sky-blue eyes widened.

“Clovis...?”

“Please don’t stress yourself, Your Highness. Are you awake? You fainted while in the Hall of Time.”

Alicia slowly sat up on her bed, Clovis's large hand moving to support her back. His other hand held onto hers tightly, as if protecting her. Perhaps he had forgotten about it, but as his gaze followed Alicia's, he panicked.

"This is...! I am truly sorry!"

"Don't let go!"

Clovis raised his head in surprise at Alicia's sharp command, his cool violet eyes wide as he stared at her.

"Why...are you crying?"

"Huh?"

Alicia was suddenly aware of the large tears trailing down her cheeks. Each hot droplet chased after the previous and fell onto her sheets in soft puddles that spread and soaked into the fabric.

Clovis frowned. He didn't know how to deal with his crying mistress. After a moment's hesitation, he reached out and wiped Alicia's tears away with a finger.

"Can you trust me?"

Alicia hiccupped in response, trying to hold back her tears. As if sensing her answer, he cupped her cheek, his actions no longer hesitant.

"Please don't carry the burden alone. I cannot stand to see you cry."

Finally, Alicia let herself go. Small cries slowly built into loud sobs, as if she were a young child. Her tears felt endless as she wiped at her eyes again and again, Clovis's large, warm hand rubbing her back, soothing her.

She had been holding it in all this time.

And now that the dam was broken, she could no longer withhold the truth.

"...I've...been having a dream."

"Yes."

"In the dream, everyone hates me."

"I see."

“I was hated, alone... Then, I died...!”

No, that wasn't true.

Shaking her head vehemently, Alicia took a deep breath and let it all out.

“In the near future, I will be killed... No, I've actually already died once. This is my second life.”

She had only recently regained memories of her death.

In her previous life, she'd been Queen of Heiland.

She had died as the Poisonous Rose of Ruin.

The messenger of the stars had entrusted the future to her.

...But she couldn't tell Clovis that he was the one who killed her. Aside from that fact, she confided everything she'd vowed to keep secret in her heart to the youth before her.

Clovis remained silent throughout Alicia's rant, responding only with a few nods. As her story trailed to an end, Alicia was suddenly filled with regret.

Clovis must surely think she'd lost her mind.

However, her adviser smiled at the quiet Alicia, as if guessing her mind.

“You think that I don't believe you.”

“Even I don't believe myself.”

Alicia averted her gaze, hoping to hide her reddened eyes, but the hand holding hers tightened.

“But I do believe you, Your Highness.”

“...Liar.”

“I will not lie to you.”

“Liar!”

Tears streamed from her eyes again as she shrieked and glared at Clovis. However, his serious gaze never wavered as he shook his head slowly.

“I don't think you would say these things as some sort of prank. Besides, I can

clearly see how much you are suffering now. That is enough proof for me.”

New tears fell from Alicia’s eyes. Through her blurred vision, the gentle smile on Clovis’s face looked just like the one in her dream.

“I promised to serve you with my everything... And if the future is causing Your Highness to suffer so, then I will change it. Because I am your adviser.”

“See, didn’t I tell you? You can change the future.”

The cheerful voice of the messenger echoed in Alicia’s ears as she dissolved into tears once again.

5. The Princess's Resolve and a Ruler's Capacity

CLOVIS was waiting.

Dressed casually in a long, dark brown coat and with his glossy jet-black hair artlessly styled, he looked like a noble heading out for a fun day about town.

Just then, the girlish squeals coming from the room in front of him died down, and the doors opened. Annie was the first to walk out, throwing a teasing wink at Clovis.

“Thank you for waiting, young master. The lady, your *sister*, is ready.” Annie stepped aside, revealing a small figure emerging slowly.

“How do I look? Too strange?”

It was Alicia, clad in a moss green dress with a subtle but cute design, peeking out from underneath a charcoal grey hooded cape. She fidgeted, unused to dressing this way, but Clovis just smiled.

“Of course not. You look wonderful, Alice.”



A small rewind.

Clovis was part of the revolution.

He was the one who killed Alicia.

Aside from these two facts, Alicia laid bare all that she knew of her previous life to the young man. When the princess had calmed down, the black-haired adviser spoke.

“To change the future, the greatest issue at the moment is to prevent the war with Erdal. That said, the information you remember from your previous life is definitely not enough to go on...”

Alicia's eyes widened. Clovis had taken it upon himself to change the future. Deep in thought, he finally nodded with a serious expression.

“Let us try to find out more about Erdal’s situation. Fortunately, the advisory office is specialized in diplomatic relations like this. In addition, I also have personal connections from my time as part of the inspection squad.”

True to his word, Clovis looked into Erdal’s internal affairs and reported back to her in a few days. Alicia was astonished.

“First, Erdal probably won’t wage war with anyone in the next five years,” he told her.

“Can you be sure of that?”

It was their typical evening meeting. Alicia blinked as she questioned her talented adviser. Usually, Annie or Martha would be present, but Alicia had made sure to clear everyone out today, leaving the two of them free to talk.

“There are numerous reasons, but the biggest is that Empress Elizabeth is preoccupied with domestic reforms.”

Alicia swallowed hard, waiting anxiously for Clovis to continue. She recalled her father mentioning the same: that the empress was passionate about instilling order in her country right now.

“This was one of the reasons why our inspection squad was sent to Erdal... Empress Elizabeth is busy promoting national centralization now,” Clovis explained.

“...Hmm.”

Alicia’s mouth dropped open in confusion. Unfazed, as if he had been expecting her incomprehension, Clovis took out a large piece of paper.

“Please take a look. This is Heiland’s current political system.”

Alicia frowned unwittingly as she looked over the paper printed with the names of all of Heiland’s regions. She might be a princess, but she hadn’t received any education on how the kingdom’s politics worked yet.

A smile slipped out from Clovis when he saw his mistress’s perplexed look.

“There’s no need for Your Highness to understand everything. Please let me show you with an easy example.”

Clovis traced a finger around the word “District Council” printed on the paper.

“Aside from territories under the direct control of the royal family, the rest of Heiland is entrusted to longstanding noble houses with titles of marquis or higher. To put it simply, the noble lords come under the jurisdiction of the district council, but they do hold real power as well. Does you follow so far?”

“I guess.” Alicia nodded humbly.

“In contrast, Empress Elizabeth’s reforms will abolish such a system. In that case, the land will be ruled by government offices under the direct control of the district council rather than any noble lord. Of course, this undermines the nobility’s individual powers, and they will come under the centralized government, which holds complete power.”

“This is difficult, so I’m not really sure... But won’t this upset the nobles?” Alicia guessed.

If the same reforms were to be implemented in Heiland, the Privy Council, mostly made up of powerful nobles holding important territories, would never accept it without a fight. In fact, rebellion would most likely happen, leading to a revolution and a ruined kingdom.

However, Clovis just shook his head.

“No one dares openly oppose the empress. In addition, Erdal has always been a highly centralized empire. Unlike Heiland, it shares borders with many other countries, so the centralization process happened relatively early on in their history.”

Her adviser’s violet eyes turned towards her.

“If the reforms are successful, Erdal’s power as an empire will double. The citizens are enlightened, and even commoners can aspire to rise in the world. Such things make Erdal extremely receptive to reform.”

It was a golden opportunity for change, and the empress wouldn’t let it go to waste because of something as boorish as war. That was why Erdal wouldn’t engage in war for the next five years, at least.

When her adviser concluded, Alicia’s heart heaved a sigh of relief.

...I'm glad I confided in Clovis about my previous life.

She would never have found all of this out if she had to do it on her own.

The future. Alicia still didn't know what would happen. While she couldn't remember how old she was when she was killed, judging by their appearances, they had at most fifteen years until that fateful night.

"Did you find anything that could spark a war?" she asked.

"Currently, our two countries are on good terms politically and diplomatically, but it's impossible to use that to predict the future."

"I see."

Alicia tapped a finger on her chin as she thought. Even if there was no clear trigger for war, she knew that Heiland must stay on guard in case anything happened. Thankfully, they had a grace period of several years, which gave them ample time to prepare.

"We'll have to keep an eye on Erdal if we hope to maintain the current peace... But I'd still like to prepare for war without raising any suspicions," Alicia said. "What can we do?"

"We can stockpile food, replenish our weapons, and strengthen our border defenses. Fortunately, Robert von Belt has taken inspiration from our neighbors and put together a proposal detailing ways to strengthen our defenses. We can urge the advisory office to put his proposal into practice."

"Yes, please. I want to protect Father, but I also want to avoid bloodshed and starvation among our people."

"As you wish." A smile appeared on Clovis's handsome face. "You really were born with a heart that is above others, Your Highness."

"Why do you think that?" Alicia blinked and asked in a quavering voice.

Lady Fourier reprimanded her endlessly for being too carefree. No one had ever praised her like this before. Yet her adviser's eyes remained gentle as he took in her bewildered expression.

"I can tell from the way you behave around your maids and towards me. You cannot stand seeing your subjects suffer. While you're aware of your status,

you still treat your subjects as equals and listen to their opinions. That's not something anyone can do."

"Th-Thank you."

Alicia felt awkward as she thanked her adviser in a small voice. His expression was serious, but he had to be exaggerating. She snuck a peek upwards and caught sight of her adviser's dazzling smile, his face full of devotion.

"...Erm, Clovis? I'm grateful for the compliments, but I'm not that big of a deal. I'm just interested in the future because of my memories of my previous life."

Before Alicia regained those memories, she never gave a single thought about the kingdom's future, nor did she attend any official ceremonies, so that version of her would never have appointed Clovis to be her adviser.

Even after she shared this with Clovis, the young man shook his head slowly.

"What is important is how you think and act when opportunities arise. At the very least, I understand Your Highness's true intentions, and I'm glad that you are my mistress."

Alicia's face heated up, and she turned away. Clovis had always been passionate about proclaiming his loyalty, but it was starting to have an effect on her lately. She wanted to brush off his words with a joke, but the embarrassment made her forget what she wanted to say.

"B-But I told you. I'm afraid of going outside the castle and of our own people. I'm not fit to stand above others."

"About that. May I make a suggestion?"

A vague sense of unease overcame Alicia as she stared at him.

"I'm almost afraid of what you're going to say."

"It's not something preposterous. Your Highness, I would love to invite you to visit the castle town and see the people with your own eyes."

"I knew it!" Alicia sprang to her feet and dashed behind the sofa. She peeked around the sofa and glared at her smiling adviser. "Don't you remember how distraught I was in the Hall of Time the other day?! What if I have another panic

attack while out in town?”

“I will accompany you the entire way, of course. I’ll protect you from danger with my life.”

“That’s not the point, Clovis. That’s not the point.” She shook her head.

“I happen to be one of the best swordsmen from the Academy.”

“Are you even listening to me?!”

In the end, after much persuasion from Clovis, Alicia promised to go on an inspection tour outside the castle.

Her mind filled with doubt as her shoulders drooped. Either way, would Lady “Iron Mask” Fourier even agree to let the princess leave the castle...?



“**SHE** may not.”

“But, Lady Fourier—”

“She may not.”

Alicia watched the expected argument repeat itself before her eyes for the past thirty minutes, and she let out a quiet sigh.

“She’s more stubborn than the rumors suggest...”

Clovis sighed, exhausted, after the chief lady-in-waiting left. He’d failed in his task to convince her to let Alicia leave the castle. Despite his attempts to win the argument with logic, Lady Fourier’s mask never slipped, and Clovis soon ran out of steam.

“She believes that a princess must be raised carefully and away from all eyes,” Alicia told him. “Ever since Mother’s death, she’s been passionate about raising me up to become the ideal lady. I hope you won’t blame her for that.”

“Even so, that was too much. Nothing I said seemed to have gotten through to her...” Even the intelligent Clovis was no match for Lady Fourier’s Iron Mask. He looked so dejected that Alicia wondered if she could help out somehow.

She’d initially been reluctant, but Clovis’s enthusiasm made her reconsider. Maybe she should take the plunge and head outside for a look after all.

However, judging by this latest exchange, it'd be impossible to obtain Lady Fourier's permission to do so.

Clovis was muttering to himself, gearing up to persuade Lady Fourier one last time, when Alicia spoke up.

"I've decided. I'll go ask for permission."

Clovis looked at her, confused. "Is there someone else we can ask besides Lady Fourier?"

Alicia looked back at her adviser, then nodded.

"Someone whose decision is law. I'm talking about the king, of course."



"YOU want to go outside the castle, Cia?"

"Yes, Father."

They were having dinner when Alicia made her plea to King James. The king, who was enjoying his dish of wine-stewed beef, blinked his almond-colored eyes at his daughter's sudden request.

"Why? There aren't any festivals happening in town at this time of year."

Alicia clasped her hands tightly over her knees as her father tilted his head in confusion. Without Clovis by her side, she had to convince her father herself. Taking a deep breath, Alicia gathered her thoughts, looked straight at her father, and spoke.

"I want to know more about the people of our kingdom."

King James's fatherly smile morphed into the stern look of the ruling king. "Remember what I told you a while back—that you should stick to what you know is right and take on different challenges. Is visiting the castle town a decision made according to that advice?"

"Yes." Alicia nodded, maintaining eye contact with her father. "Right now, it is important for me to visit the castle town and understand the people's hearts."

"All right. You may go."

The king gave a simple nod, and Alicia blinked. She leaned across the table,

hoping to confirm her father's decision, even as he moved to take another bite of his beef.

"Really? But Lady Fourier said I can't go."

"Leave Anri to me. You have spoken well tonight. I was wondering why you came to ask me, so it's because Anri had already denied you." The king chuckled merrily as he raised his glass of wine. "Be on your guard. Don't be reckless. As long as you promise to keep to these two rules, then I'll allow it. I hope you learn much from your trip."

The red wine in his glass swirled elegantly in time with the king's words.



THAT was how Alicia came to be dressed up by her two maids.

I wonder if I'll stand out like this. She checked her front and back reflections in the floor-length mirror.

They were supposed to go on an incognito inspection tour, so the concept of her style was that of a nobleman's daughter living in a mansion in the capital, out on a casual walk around town. The colors and designs shouldn't be too extravagant, and her blue hair, the princess's most striking feature, was to remain tucked away out of sight.

...And while all these important points were taken care of, why did she feel like the inverted color version of a certain Riding Hood character?

"Annie, Martha. I know this is a rare occasion, but perhaps I can wear something a little plainer—"

"Surely not! This is so cute! It's the perfect ensemble!" Martha cried and grabbed Alicia into a hug, rubbing their cheeks together.

"Exactly! Oh, my. Your Highness is just so adorable... Oh, princess. Could you please call me 'big sis'?" Annie, who stood to the side with a blush, narrowed her eyes slyly.

"Huuuh..." Trapped by her fawning maids, all Alicia could do was stand and endure their affections.

Clovis pressed his fingers against his temple and sighed, unable to stay

indifferent. “Ladies... Can’t you see that you are bothering Her Highness?”

“What? You’ll be stealing Her Highness from us for an entire day; shouldn’t we be allowed this at least?”

“Lord Clovis is so lucky. I’d love to go on an outing with Her Highness...”

Both maids pouted, dissatisfied. But, surprisingly, they let go of Alicia, not wishing to bother her. Clovis bent down to Alicia’s height, fixing the hood that Martha’s hug had knocked askew.

Clovis himself was also well-disguised for the trip. While out in the city, the two of them were to play the roles of a young nobleman and his little sister.

Dressed accordingly in a long coat, he looked put-together but a little rough, and even Alicia, who should’ve been used to his good looks, couldn’t help but be charmed. In fact, the way Clovis was on one knee and looking at her face so closely was getting Alicia restless and worked up.

“Erm, Clovis...? Do you think it strange?” she asked.

“Hmm? What do you mean, Your Highness?”

Her adviser smiled, his gaze gentle as always, but Alicia couldn’t look away. Suppressing the urge to run away, Alicia gripped the hem of her skirt and looked up at Clovis with fearful eyes.

“Is this strange? Do these clothes suit me?”

“Yes. I think they suit you very well.”

“You really, really mean it?”

“I really, really do, though you are unusually anxious today, Your Highness.” Clovis chuckled lightly before patting Alicia’s head.

Next to them, Annie and Martha complained.

“How lucky! He’s going to have Her Highness all to himself! How lucky!”

“No fair! Your Highness, please let me hug you one more tiime!”

“Ladies! Please calm down!!”

The retainers bickered around Alicia, though none of their words registered in

her mind.

Why does it feel like everyone's going crazy today? Alicia wondered idly as she scratched at her cheek underneath her hood.



EVEN if they were going into town, they couldn't just waltz out the gates. The plan was to get on a carriage and slip out through the back gate. Right as Alicia and Clovis exited the castle's back door, a squire standing next to their carriage bowed his head in respect.

"Lord Claude, Lady Alice. It's an honor to escort you on the road."

"No need to stand on ceremony, Robert. We'll be counting on you today." Holding her skirt, Alicia lightly curtsied, but the man tutted and wagged his finger.

"No can do, princess. Today, I am Ron, Claude's servant." Robert von Belt, a former member of the inspection squad, answered with a playful wink.

After their return to Heilland, Robert, who represented the Order of Knights in the squad, was appointed vice-captain of the knights of the Imperial Guard at Lord Otto's recommendation. It was an unprecedented appointment considering his young age.

While in the inspection squad, Robert and Clovis found that they often shared the same opinions, so they started to work together. Clovis was the one who nominated Robert to act as their escort for today's trip.

Despite that, their personalities couldn't be more different.

"So, princess, what do you think about this guy over here?" Robert asked. "He's so serious all the time. Does it stress you out?"

"Not this again..." Clovis sighed. "Do be more respectful around Her Highness."

"What are you saying? This is Miss Alice, Lord Claude's little sister, isn't she? We can afford to drop the formalities just for today, right?"

"Yes, that will be fun for me, too," Alicia giggled.

Robert puffed out his chest triumphantly, though Clovis frowned at his friend.

“I apologize, Your Highness,” Clovis said. “Please allow me to talk to the commander to see if we can get someone more decent to be our escort.”

“Hey, hey, hey, stop that! How can there be anyone more suitable than I, the reincarnation of the Sword Saint?”

He was right. Robert might be easygoing in his speech and manners, but his strength was unparalleled even among the knights. There were rumors that he could take on an entire troop on his own.

Clovis was also so skilled with the sword that everyone acknowledged that he would’ve been successful if he had chosen to join the knights. So even though security had to be kept to a minimum since this was an incognito trip, Alicia couldn’t have been better protected.

With that decided, Alicia and Clovis slipped into the carriage while Robert took the driver’s seat, and they were finally off to the castle town.



“**ARE** you feeling unwell, Your Highness?” Clovis asked.

“Oh, no... I’m just a little nervous,” Alicia confessed.

Putting it into words somehow made her anxious heart relax. It was strange.

Seated across from her, Clovis placed a hand on his chest, his violet eyes shining with sincerity. “Please be assured. No matter what happens, I will protect Your Highness.”

“Thank you. I trust you.”

A beautiful smile graced her black-haired adviser’s handsome face.

Feeling strange, Alicia turned her gaze away and looked out the window.

She knew that Clovis Cromwell was the one who killed her in her previous life. However, he was now the only one who knew about that life and was working with her to change the future. The messenger of the stars, who had knowledge of both timelines, must be watching over this ironic coincidence with much amusement.

That said, I haven't had that dream for some time now.

She gasped when she realized that while she was gazing at the townscape slowly passing outside the window. Now that she thought about it, the last time she had that nightmare was the night when she confessed everything to Clovis.

Her heart warmed at the memory of their joined hands. Perhaps that was the first time she had really come to trust him.

No. That's not the only thing.

After discussing her previous life and the future with her adviser, being able to share the burden with someone made the terror and pain much easier to bear than worrying alone.

"It's not fair, Clovis," Alicia muttered softly to herself with a pout.

"What's not, Your Highness?"

Despite the loud rattling of the carriage wheels, her adviser's sharp ears still picked up her grumbling. Caught, Alicia glared angrily at Clovis, who only tilted his head in confusion.

"You're helping me out so much, but I can't do anything for you. That's not really fair."

"What are you saying? You were the one who saved my life."

Clovis answered with a smile, though his eyes were wide with surprise. The princess wasn't convinced. True, she had appointed him as her adviser, but he was the one who had saved her.

Careful to keep her balance in the swaying carriage, Alicia leaned forward, closer to her adviser, who was seated across from her. "Are you facing any troubles? You can let me know. Or how about something that you want? I won't accept 'nothing' as an answer."

"Huh? Well, about that..."

Trapped without an escape, the serious Clovis finally gave her question some thought. Then, after a short pause, he opened his thin lips and uttered a surprising request.

“Please let me stay by your side.”

“What?”

Alicia stared at her adviser, shocked. Clovis also seemed to realize what he'd just said and panicked.

“Please forget I said anything! I just, I don't know why I said that...”

“Honestly!” Alicia could only blink, unable to understand Clovis's request. “You want to stay by my side? You have to, don't you? What's an adviser for if not to stay by their master's side?”

Alicia was puzzled, but Clovis's response surprised her yet again. He sat frozen, mouth agape, as he stared at her with a look that didn't suit his handsome face at all. Then, his pale cheeks slowly turned pink. And Alicia might have imagined it, but she thought she saw a faint hint of tears in those deep violet eyes.

What was all this about?

Alicia stared at him, uncomprehending, as he turned towards the window as if trying to escape her gaze.

“...If anyone is being unfair, it's you,” he said in a whisper-soft voice. “No matter how hard I try to repay the kindness you have shown me, you turn around so easily and bless me with even more. At this rate, I might spend my whole life and still be unable to repay the debt.”

“I'm sorry, but I don't understand?”

“Never mind. It's not something Your Highness needs to know.”

This sulking demeanor was too uncharacteristic of her usually loyal retainer... It filled Alicia with curiosity.

“But I've shared my biggest secret with you, remember? Can you tell me yours, too?” she asked sweetly. “Or is it something you can't tell me?”

“...It's a secret.”

“Oh, come on! It's fine, Clovis.”

“I said it's a secret. Argh, you are just—”

Taking advantage of her small size, Alicia half-climbed onto Clovis's lap, forcing her face against her adviser's as he tried to turn away.

Maybe it was because they were away from the castle that Clovis was also less reserved, trying to push Alicia off. Anyone seeing them now would assume that they really were brother and sister. And if Alicia's maids had been present as well, their jealousy would have driven them mad.

Just then, the carriage door opened with a creak.

"Young master, little lady, we are here... And what *are* you two doing?"

"Oh, are we here already? Let's go then. Let's go right now!"

Clovis rushed out of the carriage in exaggeratedly high spirits, brushing past Robert, who was looking at them with narrowed eyes. The sounds of people bustling about on the street flooded into the carriage. Alicia felt a trickle of fear.

Clovis reached out to her from the brightness outside, sensing her discomfort. The breeze ruffled his dark hair, and his beautiful violet eyes twinkled with amusement.

"It's all right. Come on, Alice."

Alicia gazed at Clovis's slender hand, then at his smiling face.

How strange. Those large and warm hands of his had led her out of the curse that was her previous life. Today, she would put her trust in those hands again.

"Yes, brother."

Alicia laid her small hand over Clovis's, and the princess finally stepped out to meet the citizens of Heilland.



THEIR carriage had stopped in an area populated by artisans who crafted accessories such as clocks and glasswork. People were already out and about their morning business, hurrying up and down the road in haste.

Robert, or Ron, handed over the carriage to another knight and followed them a few paces back. They decided before heading out that Clovis would serve as Alicia's close-range escort, while Robert would keep an eye on the

surroundings from afar.

“There are many people out at this time. Please hold my hand tightly so we don’t get separated.” Clovis smiled gently as their hands clasped together, fully in big brother mode.

It was the opposite of how things were in the castle, where Alicia would usually lead the way with Clovis following behind. Somewhat embarrassed, Alicia’s face heated up under her charcoal gray hood.

Heilland’s weather was known for its drastic changes, so it wasn’t uncommon for its citizens to dress like Alicia, with headpieces to protect them from the rain. Annie told her about this before she left, and now Alicia could see that it was true, spotting quite a few people wearing hoods and hats.

Comforted by the fact that she blended in with the townspeople, Alicia allowed herself to be captivated by her first sight of the world outside the castle in this lifetime.

“The town looks even more beautiful up close than from afar.”

From her spot atop the castle crenelations, all she could see were neat rows of red and orange rooftops. While seeing the town like a doll’s house was cute, Alicia thought that being able to see everything up close like this was much more charming.

She’d thought that all the buildings were identical, but upon closer inspection, each one was unique. Behind the large glass windows, artisans worked hard, hunched over their crafts, or engaged in lively conversations with customers.

“These artisans are guardians of Egdiel’s traditional craft techniques, passed down through the generations.” Clovis shared more about Egdiel, the capital city, while pulling on Alicia’s hand.

King Estel, the founding father, had originally built this town as a military base designed to ward off enemies invading from the south. However, as the kingdom grew, the military fortress shifted closer towards Erdal in the south, leaving Egdiel to become a gathering place for artisans and scholars.

The artisans, in particular, spread their roots in Egdiel early in the kingdom’s history, eager to sell their crafts to traders who came to the royal capital.

Metal and glasswork, created using time-honored techniques, were in high demand. The harsh climate made it hard to grow crops, so trade brought in by the artisans became Heilland's main source of income.

"However, the technology in other countries has become more advanced in recent years, and there's more competition now. Heilland should—no, must—not lose out in that regard." Clovis gradually grew absorbed in his own thoughts, then suddenly started. He looked at Alicia with an anxious frown. "You're here to enjoy the town, and here I am, talking too much again. Shall we drop these complicated topics and check out the marketplace?"

"Can we?!" Alicia's eyes sparkled as she recalled the street stalls and lively crowds she'd seen from her perch in the castle. Clovis smiled in response.

"We're heading towards an area where goods crafted by artisan apprentices are sold. That's where you can really feel the life of the town."

So that was why Clovis hadn't brought Alicia directly to the marketplace but to this road first. Alicia took a final look at the artisans through each window before Clovis led her off by the hand, and they turned down several streets.

Suddenly, Alicia stood before a plaza, and she let out an appreciative gasp. The street stalls lined up in the plaza were so colorful. They were filled to the brim with vegetables, fruits, and other sundry items.

"Wow! So this is the market!"

Lively chatter from customers and stall owners filled the place. An aspiring artist was sketching out the scene on canvas, and a man playing an instrument was attracting a crowd of onlookers.

Clovis's violet eyes crinkled in fondness at the sight of Alicia's eyes sparkling and darting about the plaza, taking everything in.

"I knew you would like this place."

"Yes. The market looks like so much fun!"

Something flashed at the edge of her vision. Turning in that direction, Alicia let go of Clovis's hand and dashed off.

"Oh, what a cute little lady. Where did you come from?" A woman who was

arranging the goods in the stall looked at Alicia dashing over with wide eyes, then smiled and bent down to her level.

The stall specialized in glasswork, and Alicia couldn't look away from the beautifully cut and patterned pieces or the brooches glittering in the sunlight.

"Are all these for sale?"

"Yes. My husband's apprentices made these. They may not be intricate enough to sell in proper stores, but they are true gems in this marketplace."

"Hello, madam. I apologize for my sister's excitement."

A low, pleasant voice sounded from above her head, and Alicia felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, pulling her attention away from the ornaments and decorations. Looking up, Clovis was by her side again.

The madam's eyes widened, and she hurriedly lowered her head when she noticed his tailored long coat and refined manner of speaking.

"Heavens! You are nobles! Please forgive my rudeness; I wasn't aware."

Dashing around excitedly was not exactly ladylike behavior, which was probably why the madam had not thought she was a nobleman's daughter at first. The smiling and kind lady was suddenly shy and reserved.

Hesitant because of her change in demeanor, Alicia glanced up timidly at her. "Erm, may I hold the items so I can take a closer look?"

"Oh... But these are not worthy of a noble lady like yourself. Why not check out the merchants' stores instead?"

Before the conversation could get more awkward, Clovis came to the rescue. "This is my sister's first time in the market, but I've been here countless times myself. I really like the atmosphere here and want to show my sister around today."

"Oh my. A young nobleman in the market?" The madam's mouth dropped open in surprise, though Clovis just smiled obligingly and turned on his full charm.

"I'd like to give my sister something to remember today by. Would you allow her to pick a gift for herself?"

Even Alicia could tell that the madam was completely taken by him. While admiring Clovis, she broke into a smile and gestured at her stall. “Goodness me. Of course, she can do anything she likes. She’s lucky to have such a wonderful big brother.”

“Haha...”

The sight of her retainer teasing the woman made Alicia’s smile falter. Clovis had never smiled like that at anyone besides her. She puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“Come, Alice,” Clovis urged. “Do pick out anything you like... Alice?”

“Heavens! Could the young lady be jealous that her beloved brother smiled at someone else?”

“What? That’s not true!”

“Is it now, Alice?”

“It’s not!” Alicia denied it insistently, her face red, but the madam and Clovis just laughed. The young man reached out to pat Alicia on the head, but that only angered her more.

I’ll get back at you once we’re home, “big brother”! The princess made that pledge to herself, embarrassed.

Unaware of Alicia’s vengeful thoughts, Clovis picked up several pieces of glasswork and offered them to Alicia so she could see. “Look. Isn’t this the one that caught your eye?”

The brooch in front of her eyes blew away all thoughts of mischief from Alicia’s mind. She carefully took it in her hands and watched it sparkle with light. The glass used to make the brooch was bright and clear, the same shade of blue as Alicia’s hair and eyes. The intricate cutting made it shine like a jewel.

“It’s so pretty...”

“It’s your blue.”

Alicia’s heart skipped a beat. Her adviser’s voice was right next to her as he bent down to gaze at the brooch in her hands.

What was that?

Alicia was confused. Her heart had never reacted that way to anything before. Just what was it? It was different from the way her heart raced after a nightmare. Nevertheless, she couldn't calm down, to the point that her chest hurt a little.

While she stood pondering, Clovis paid for the brooch. The madam took the item from Alicia's hands and pinned it to her cape near her breast.

"There! It looks so good on you! Our apprentice will be overjoyed to see his work adorn the clothes of a young lady like you."

The madam nodded in satisfaction before her gaze shifted to meet Clovis's eyes again. He smiled at her kindly.

The pain in her chest this time felt stronger than before.

What's this? What's happening to me?! Alicia berated her heart for its strange behavior.

"Clo?" A young boy's voice suddenly called out from somewhere nearby. "Is that you, Clo?! It's really you! Long time no see!"

The young boy's eyes sparkled as he sprinted towards her adviser, addressing him once again as "Clo." He looked about one or two years older than Alicia. Dressed in a lightly stained shirt and pants with a slightly too-large hat on his head, he was definitely not nobility.

Despite that, Clovis recognized him as well. "Ed? You've grown so much. But, why are you here?"

"Well, this right here is my family's stall."

"Oh, I was just thinking the crafting resembled your father's work," Clovis said.

"Um...?" Feeling left out, Alicia meekly raised her voice, and the two turned to face her. The boy finally noticed Alicia. His eyes widened and darted between her and Clovis.

"Er, Clo? Who's the girl?"

“...My sister.”

Clovis seemed uncomfortable lying to his friend. However, the boy named Ed responded in shock, his eyes as big as saucers.

“Your sister?!”

The boy whirled to face Alicia, and she stiffened under his scrutiny. Before she knew it, he was in front of her, scrubbing a hand roughly against his pant leg before extending it towards her.

“I’m Edmund, the glassmaker’s son.”

“Alice.”

Still not grasping the situation, Alicia nonetheless shook Edmund’s hand as she introduced herself. Edmund ignored her confusion and stared holes into her before he broke into a grin.

“You’re so lame, Clo! If you’re gonna bring your sister out and about town, why didn’t you bring her to meet us sooner?!”

“O-Oh.”

Edmund grinned as he nudged Clovis with an elbow, while the adviser looked a little sheepish, scratching at his cheek with a finger.

Just how did these two know each other?

Finally, Clovis noticed the frown on his mistress’s face and hurriedly explained for both her and the madam. “I used to take strolls here alone when I was a student, and that’s how I met Ed. I had no idea that he was the son of the stall owner here...”

“Don’t you remember, mum?” Edmund said to the madam. “I used to tell you about a strange nobleman who walks around the market like one of us commoners.”

“Oh! Is this who you were talking about?!”

Clovis and Edmund had met when he was at the Royal Academy. After his graduation, he’d joined the inspection squad on the mission to Erdal, so this was their first time meeting again after two years.

The madam quickly shared how Clovis was showing his sister around the market and had even bought an accessory from their stall. Edmund proudly thumped himself on the chest.

“Okay! You must’ve had enough of the market now, huh? Let me show you guys around the area. All you nobles are used to visiting those expensive and pretentious shops, so you’re not gonna know any of the places with yummy food or nice hidden spots.”

“I may not be as knowledgeable as you, but I’m sure I know this area quite well, too,” Clovis countered.

“Not well enough, Clo. C’mon, you gotta learn about the town from real townspeople like me!”

Giving the pair a thumbs up, Edmund started walking away, and Alicia looked up questioningly at her adviser. Clovis just gave a wry smile before indicating that they should follow.



IN fact, Edmund was deeply familiar with the town of Egdiel.

They ended up at the glassworker’s workshop, where he showed them the delicate craftsmanship up close, then to an eatery popular with the townsfolk, and finally to the bank of the Eram River, where they sang and danced to music performed by a practicing musician.

“I’m always pleasantly surprised by how well you know everyone, Ed,” Clovis commented, impressed.

“Aren’t you glad you came with me?” Edmund grinned, rubbing his nose with a finger.

Alicia couldn’t help but chime in merrily as well. “You’re amazing, Edmund! It seems like you’re friends with everyone in town!”

“Y-Yeah. Well, my dad brings me everywhere, so I get to know people,” Edmund grumbled, his face slightly red as he turned it away from Alicia.

They reached a small church on the outskirts of town. Here, orphans were taken care of by the clergy. When they grew up, artisans would drop by to pick

them up as apprentices or workers. Thanks to this arrangement, Edmund's family had a deep connection with the church.

Alicia had just finished a crazy game of tag with the church kids on the spacious lawn in front of the building and was seated on a bench when Clovis came to sit next to her, a worried frown on his face.

"Are you tired?"

Alicia shook her head. Thanks to her daily routine of running away from her maids in the castle, her stamina was nothing short of amazing.

Even the church kids, who had initially crowded around Alicia excitedly with shouts of "You're so cute!" and "You look like a princess!" were defeated by her small but powerful body, screaming and dashing away when she chased after them.

"I'm fine. In fact, I had so much fun. I've never played tag with so many people before."

Her adviser's face relaxed upon seeing her sparkling sky-blue eyes. However, Edmund, who was seated on Alicia's other side, pouted.

"My impression of you nobles has been destroyed... How can a noble girl possibly have more stamina than me...?"

"Well, I do have daily training at home," she bragged.

If Lady Fourier could see how vigorously she played tag just now, she would surely faint. As they were chatting, a group of church kids came over to the three seated on the bench. This group wasn't the ones who had played tag with them. A young girl stepped forward and looked up at Clovis. She held a black kitten in her arms.

"We wanna hear the rest of the story you were telling, Clo."

"The story?"

Clovis's almond-shaped eyes widened at the children's request. Following Edmund's lead, the kids had all taken to calling Clovis "Clo."

While Alicia and Edmund were busy playing tag on the lawn, Clovis had been seated with the other kids, telling them stories he knew as well as interesting

things he'd seen during his travels to Erdal.

Judging by his bewilderment, he probably hadn't expected the children to take such a liking to him. Alicia gave him a nudge on the back.

"Go on, big brother. Everyone's waiting for you."

"...Of course. I'll be going then."

Clovis was led away by the hand towards a group of children seated in a circle. Even some of those who had played tag with Alicia joined in as well.

The warm sunlight, a rare treat in Heiland's climate, shone down upon the joyful children gathered around Clovis. The sight of his side profile as he smiled at the children was so gentle that Alicia's heart clenched a little with loneliness.

Loneliness?

It was another foreign feeling for Alicia. Her adviser was just being friendly with the townsfolk. She should feel happy about that. So what was this lonely feeling?

"Alice? Hey, Alice, you listening?"

Edmund was speaking, and Alicia gasped as she was wrenched back to reality. It seemed that he'd been trying to get her attention for a while.

"I'm sorry, Ed. What is it?"

"Quiet! Or Clo will hear."

Edmund raised a finger to his lips, and Alicia blinked. The expression on the boy's face as he snuck a glance towards Clovis looked so serious. She nodded, then leaned towards Edmund so he could speak without catching her adviser's attention.

"Is this okay?"

"Yeah. You're gonna keep this a secret from Clo, right?"

Alicia nodded again, and Edmund lowered his voice even further.

"Do you like Clo?"

"H-HUUUUH?!"

“Idiot! Quiet!!”

Edmund hurriedly covered Alicia’s mouth at her unintentional shout in response to his bombshell question.

Clovis heard Alicia’s squeal as well, glancing towards them. However, the children around him drew his attention away again, and though he looked over in concern, he didn’t make a move to come towards them.

Alicia and Edmund both sighed in relief. They exchanged a glance and continued their whispered conversation.

“Are you dumb?! What if Clo overheard us?”

“Th-That’s because you asked something weird!”

“No I didn’t! So, do you like your brother?”

My brother?

Alicia belatedly realized her mistake. Edmund was just trying to find out how she felt about Clovis, her “big brother.”

Oh, what a scare...

Alicia let out a tired sigh as Edmund raised an eyebrow. Even if he’d meant what she thought he meant, was it natural for her to react in that way? This train of thought didn’t even occur to the young princess.

So, how should she answer? Wasn’t it obvious from the fact that they were spending a day out together that they shared a good relationship as (fictitious) siblings? Just as she was about to give a witty reply, she caught sight of Clovis’s back profile.

“Of course, I like him.”

She chose to answer simply instead. Her adviser, surrounded by the church kids, brought a smile to her face.

The two of them shared a mystical connection that extended from their previous lives, but Clovis was such a big part of Alicia’s life now, more than she’d ever imagined.

Today was a perfect example. She’d been so afraid of the townsfolk at first,

but she still met so many amazing people. And it was because of Clovis, who held her hand through it all.

“Clo... My brother always says that I saved his life, but I think I’m the one who was saved. And when I try to show my gratitude, he tells me that he wants nothing in return. It’s annoying,” she confessed.

When she’d asked him if he wanted anything, his answer had been vague, saying that he just wanted to stay by her side. Despite that, his wish was exactly what Alicia wanted as well.

She felt fretful, but Edmund smiled, looking the happiest she’d seen him today.

“I see. I see... That’s good.”

Edmund nodded eagerly, then stretched and swung his legs up onto the far side of the bench. Lying down with his hands behind his head, he talked as he stared up at the sky, telling Alicia about Clovis’s life when he was still a student at the Royal Academy.

“He used to walk around the town all by himself.”

The two had first met in the market during one of those solo walks. His jet-black hair and violet eyes were rare, even in a place full of foreign merchants. Combined with his handsome features, Clovis stood out immediately among the townspeople.

Edmund decided to speak to Clovis on a whim. He didn’t have any customers at the stall, and Clovis hadn’t looked to be in any hurry, so Edmund thought it was a good idea to spend some time trying to get to know a nobleman.

“I asked him what he was doing, and he said he was taking a walk because his classes were canceled. I thought he was so strange. I know you nobles like to shop in those high-end stores, so how was walkin’ around the market any fun for him?”

Clovis had given an awkward smile in response to Edmund’s question, then said that he felt more carefree in the marketplace because no one here knew who he was, and he knew no one as well.

“It got me curious because Clo sounded lonely all the time. That’s why I decided to show him this side of town.”

It made Alicia anxious that her adviser’s past was being revealed to her without his permission, but she couldn’t find it in herself to ask Edmund to stop. She imagined his dejected expression, such as when Riddhe Sutherland verbally attacked him during the court ceremony. Somehow, she knew that Clovis visited the market to hide from others. His black hair and violet eyes linked him to his grandfather, Zach Graham, the great sinner.

Alicia hadn’t known about it because of her age, but the young noblemen who attended the Royal Academy would have known Clovis’s lineage with a glance. Then, jealous of his outstanding talent, they used it to bully him, just like Riddhe did.

In his effort to escape from his troubled life, Clovis chose to take refuge in places where the nobility wouldn’t visit. The market was one of these places, and that was where he met Edmund.

“Was my brother happy when he hung out with you?” she asked.

“Yeah. He was impressed by the smallest things. We’d buy food from stalls and eat it on the spot, and that alone was strange for him. I was shocked by how little you nobles know of our world.”

Hearing this, Alicia giggled. That sounded just like Clovis. He must have been extremely curious, keen to learn all about the town Edmund was showing him.

While the two never made any plans, Edmund learned Clovis’s habits and when he would usually appear around town. It became their routine, and every time they met on the streets, Edmund would drag Clovis around and show him different places.

Suddenly, Edmund’s lively storytelling trailed off, and his expression clouded over.

“But one day, I saw him being surrounded by his classmates from the Academy.”

Edmund had spotted Clovis and was just about to call out to him when a group of students who looked like nobles approached the young man with

sinister smiles. Edmund had jumped into the shadows to avoid being seen.

Alicia knew what Edmund would say next. The students brought up Clovis's connection to the Graham bloodline and hurled insults at him, sneering and jeering.

"I'm not smart, so I didn't know what they were going on about, but it still pissed me off. Something about being the blood of a sinner... Oh, sorry!"

Edmund stopped mid-rant when he caught sight of Alicia and frowned awkwardly. As far as he knew, Alicia was Clovis's sister, so if Clovis was the blood of a sinner, then Alicia would probably be hurt by the same words as well.

"I'm okay. But Edmund, didn't you dislike my brother after you heard all that?"

"Of course not!!" The boy's response was unexpectedly vehement and full of indignation. "I don't know lots about Clo, but we're friends! Why would I dislike my friend over something like that?!"

Alicia heaved a sigh of relief as her shoulders drooped. The talented but lonely young noble and the friendly artisan's apprentice. Clovis and Edmund made a strange pair, but she was glad that Clovis had such a great friend on his side.

"But Clo didn't say anything back to them. He stayed quiet no matter how bad the insults got, which pissed me off more." Edmund frowned again, as if reliving the scene.



AS much as Edmund wanted to lunge out of the shadows and punch Clovis's classmates, frequent glances from Clovis pleaded for him to stay away. All he could do was think about it. He was furious.

When the classmates finally left, Edmund stomped towards Clovis, frustrated that he hadn't been allowed to intervene.

"Why didn't you say anything back?! Aren't you upset at all?!" he snapped.

The black-haired youth just shrugged. "I deserve the hate, so there's no point fighting back."

Edmund flinched in shock. However, Clovis's expression held no sadness or regret. It was as if he believed that the hatred toward himself was unavoidable.

"What's that mean?! I-I won't accept that!! A-And...the people who love you will be sad to hear you say that. Your mom will cry, right?"

"No need to worry about that, Ed," Clovis's reply was placid, said with a wry smile. "My parents will not shed any tears for me, so there's no need for you to get so upset."



"**HE** said it like it didn't mean anything. Back then, I just thought he wasn't on good terms with his family."

Was that why Clovis asked to be allowed to stay by her side?

Strangers weren't the only ones who hated Clovis because he resembled his grandfather. His own family viewed him as an unwelcome reminder of their connection to Zach Graham.

"So I was happy to see you hanging out with him, Alice. It means that Clo has someone on his side, that he's not all alone."

Alicia finally understood that her adviser's fixation on being "Graham's blood" was not unfounded. The roots of Graham's curse had sunk deep into Clovis's being, much deeper than she had imagined.

Clovis might not be aware of it consciously, but he probably didn't even fully trust Alicia. That must be the reason for his answer about wishing to stay by her side.

...Oh, how can you be so foolish?

Alicia had been dazzled by her adviser's brilliance countless times, but this was the first time she felt like reprimanding him for being foolish.

Annoyed, Alicia stood up from the bench. Edmund's eyes grew wide, but she had no time to bother with that. Glaring at Clovis as he sat under the sunshine, back towards her, she kicked the wooden bench with all her might, then dashed towards her adviser.

At the last moment, she leaped into the air and landed on Clovis's back.

“Urgh—?!” Clovis let out a groan as Alicia’s whole weight hit him.

“It’s Alice! What are you doing, Alice?!”

“Alice is attacking Clo!”

The children, who had been listening to Clovis’s story peacefully, were also startled by Alicia’s sudden intrusion and raised a commotion.

“Alici— Alice?! What *is* the matter?”

Even in his confusion, Clovis caught himself before he called out Alicia’s real name. He was always careful like that. However, Alicia didn’t reply, tightening her arms around his neck instead.

“Aah! Alice is gonna kill Clo!”

“Clo’s gonna die!”

Clovis wanted to reassure the children that a ten-year-old girl wouldn’t have enough strength to kill a man, but Alicia’s current hold on him made that difficult. Had he somehow angered the princess so much that she was attempting to strangle him from behind? As Clovis racked his brain for a reason why, Alicia spoke.

“When I was small, Mother always gave me a hug when I cried.”

“...Your Highness?” Confused by his mistress’s unusual mood, Clovis whispered so the other children wouldn’t hear.

Alicia stayed silent. She couldn’t say anything else for a while, until she sensed that her adviser was getting worried and was about to turn to face her. Suddenly embarrassed and afraid to look him in the eye, she buried her face in his neck.

“Did something happen? Has something upse—”

“When you are lonely, you have to say so.”

Alicia’s order was muffled as she spoke into his neck, but her tone was resolute. Clovis froze, not wanting to miss a word from the faint voice speaking behind him.



“When you’re suffering, you have to say so,” she repeated. “When you’re sad, you have to say so. If you want to stay by my side forever, you have to abide by these rules. Promise me.”

While she couldn’t see her adviser’s expression from her position, she sensed that he was smiling faintly. Warm fingers caressed her small hands that were wrapped around him as Clovis answered her in his pleasant, low voice.

“That is a tough order, for my days have been filled with nothing but happiness ever since I met you.”

Was it true?

Before she could ask, the children around them started to yell.

“I get it!! Alice got lonely because Clo’s talking to us!”

“Haha! Alice is a baby!”

“I’m not a baby!!” Alicia raised her head in protest, only to see the children pointing and laughing at her. Even Edmund, who had come to stand beside them, was smiling.

Just as she was about to fight back, a soft chuckle caught her attention. Clovis was laughing. It was the first time she’d seen such a genuine smile on his face that her indignation evaporated away.

Oh, whatever.

Alicia trusted Clovis, and as his friend, she worried about him too. He might not believe it now, but someday he would realize that she needed him as well.

He’s so ridiculously smart, but he can be so clueless at times.

Alicia gave a wry smile at the thought as she chased after the kids, who continued to tease her.



“ALICE! Clo!! See you again soon!!”

Alicia and Clovis finally left the church, sent off with energetic voices and plenty of waves from the children. The young clergywoman in charge of the church also stood among them, bowing in gratitude.

Waving back, Alicia and her adviser walked towards their carriage, which was parked at the end of the road. Opening the carriage door with a bow, Robert threw them a wink.

“Welcome back, young master, little lady.”

Alicia was surprised that Robert had gotten the carriage ready to go. They’d spent the day wandering about aimlessly, so it must have been hard to keep up with them. Even so, Robert didn’t lose sight of them and continued to watch over them from afar.

As they were getting into the carriage, Edmund laced his fingers behind his head and grinned at them.

“Seeya around, Clo and Alice. When you come into town again, make sure to look for me.”

“You really don’t need a ride? We can drop you off at the market,” Alicia offered.

“I’m not gonna ride in such a grand carriage. It’ll make my butt itch. Besides, I wanna stay and help the others look for the kitten,” Edmund responded with a shrug.

He was referring to the black kitten the church kids were taking care of. It had disappeared a while ago. Even Alicia had joined the search, but it still remained at large.

“I’d love to stay and help, but...”

“You have a curfew, right? No big deal. You’ll be in trouble if your dad gets upset. He must be scary when he’s angry, huh?”

“Father isn’t that scary, but there’s someone else I don’t wish to anger.” Alicia grimaced as she thought of Lady Fourier.

It was almost evening, and the road was full of carriages ferrying the nobles home and people rushing to buy food for dinner. If she didn’t get back to the castle soon, she would surely bring forth Lady Fourier’s thunderous temper.

Turning towards Edmund, she took a deep breath and thanked the friend who had introduced her to the people of her kingdom.

“I’m so glad to have met you, Edmund. Without you, I wouldn’t have met so many people around town. Thank you so much,” Alicia said, her lovely face blooming like a flower. “That’s right! I’d like to give you a gift. Is there anything you need? I’ll get a servant to deliver it to you at a later date.”

“That’s it. That’s what I dislike about you nobles.” Edmund glared at the princess with narrowed eyes and pointed accusingly at Alicia’s face. “I’m Clo’s friend. And today, I became your friend. That’s why I showed you guys around. Not because I wanted your thanks or a reward.”

“Oh...”

Edmund was right, and Alicia was at a loss for words. A wave of shame washed over her as she realized how she’d unwittingly drawn a line between Edmund and herself, separating them as commoner and royalty.

Thankfully, Edmund didn’t seem genuinely offended. A sly smile soon appeared on his face. He jerked his chin at the brooch on Alicia’s cape.

“But if you really feel that way, then put on that brooch the next time you come and play. It’ll make mum and dad happy, too. And if you buy something from us again, that’s even better.”

“I got it. It’s a promise.”

With a graceful nod, Alicia watched the boy head off before climbing into the carriage. She waved to Edmund from the window before relaxing against the plush seat.

Clovis, seated opposite Alicia, narrowed his eyes at the sight of her slumped form.

“Were you shocked by Ed’s answer?”

Alicia nodded as the black-haired adviser shifted his gaze out the window.

“Ed is right, but he is also wrong. You are this kingdom’s princess. Even if you two are equals as friends, your social standing is not the same as his.”

“In that case, I’m just saddled with a boring title.”

Clovis was right. Alicia was of the House of Chester and the only child of the current king. No one else in this kingdom had a position that rivaled hers,

except for her future husband.

When his mistress's shoulders drooped, Clovis gave the idea a little more thought.

Despite her high social standing, Princess Alicia was a rare soul who treated everyone equally and always listened to others' opinions. However, it didn't mean that she was unaware of her position as the princess.

In fact, her offer to Edmund was born from a sense of responsibility to give something in return because her position afforded her the ability to do so. It was a virtue of hers, and she shouldn't be ashamed of it.

"Is it really a boring title, though?" Clovis leaned forward, addressing his young mistress. "Because of Your Highness's position, there are things that you can do for the people."

"And what's that?"

The dejected princess looked up at him with her honest, sky-blue eyes. Clovis smiled in response.

"What you are currently working on. To save the future of our kingdom."

Outside, the horse whinnied, and the carriage shook. Robert must be driving them back to the castle. However, Alicia wasn't interested in what was outside. She gazed at her smiling adviser with a dubious expression.

"What do you mean? Heilland fell to ruin after the revolution, didn't it?"

"That's not it, exactly. I meant it in a way that affects them more directly." Clovis raised a finger to his lips, as if telling her a secret. "What do you think the people you met today were doing on the night of the revolution?"

"Kill those Erdalian dogs!!"

"Kill the ones who have dishonored Heilland's pride!!"

Alicia squeezed her eyes shut as a wave of dizziness hit her.

"Are you all right?"

"Don't worry. This isn't as bad as that episode in the Hall of Time."

Alicia smiled at her adviser, who had reached out a hand in concern, then

took some deep breaths to calm herself. After a bit, the curses ringing in her ears faded away, and she heard the noise of the townspeople outside the carriage window again.

Feeling much calmer, Alicia slowly opened her eyes.

“...I think they were probably a part of the mob. It seemed as if everyone in town had joined the revolution.”

Alicia had imagined the people screaming curses that night to be scary monsters.

However, that couldn't be further from the truth.

The people she met today were neither scary monsters nor citizens full of rage. Heilland's citizens were people with loving families who lived normal lives, and many had answered Alicia's various questions with kind smiles.

“That's right. If the revolution began in Egdiel, it's safe to assume that most of the mob was made up of artisans.”

“All those kind people taking part in such a frightening revolution...?” Alicia blinked at that realization.

“The citizens will rise up when their livelihoods are threatened. Did the king in your previous life, Fritz, rule Heilland with tyranny?”

Alicia's sky-blue eyes widened in shock. In that moment, Clovis seemed like a revolutionary, blaming her for the way the kingdom was run. Taking his mistress's expression as a confirmation, Clovis let out a sigh.

“It was a simple guess. When the prince of a country ascends to the throne as his defeated enemy's new king, there is bound to be some resistance. However, there must be another reason why it culminated in a revolution. The citizens' lives must have been destroyed even before the revolution ruined Heilland.”

Alicia stared at her adviser as he calmly analyzed the future.

“King Fritz wasn't the only one at fault,” Alicia murmured, biting her lip as she recalled her past self.

In her memories, she had been deeply in love with King Fritz. She'd protected him, even as he ran from the revolution with his mistress. She had probably

stood by silently, not protesting nor stopping what he did to her people.

She recalled the faces of everyone who had welcomed her so warmly and spoken with her today. First, the people at the market, then the artisanal workshop, then the church. The people of Heilland, working hard to live fruitful lives with their loved ones.

And she was the one who had destroyed it all.

“Blinded by love, you have turned your back on the people, and this is the result. Repent for your sins in the afterlife,” Alicia whispered.

Clovis frowned in confusion, but she just gave him a bitter smile. Her loyal adviser would never imagine that these words were his own, spoken by his previous self.

“That’s what my assailant said when he killed me... You said that I have a heart that is above others, but that’s not true at all. I put my own affections before my people.”

“But that will not happen in this life.”

Clovis was not just trying to encourage her; he fully believed his declaration as his violet eyes looked straight at her.

“The princess that I know has eyes that are boundless and clear. I am sure that you understand what it means to carry the future of the kingdom on your shoulders.”

The princess glanced back at her adviser with an understanding look in her intelligent gaze.

“To protect this kingdom is to protect its citizens. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

Her handsome adviser’s lips lifted in a smile.

Tired, Alicia sunk back against the soft seat again, letting her body sway with the motion of the carriage. Her heart hammered in her chest, a remnant of the anxiety she’d felt during their conversation.

To protect the citizens and safeguard their livelihoods.

It was how she was meant to repay her people in this second life and also change the future, as per her pact with the messenger.

Speaking of the messenger, he was definitely testing her by entrusting the kingdom's future to her. She'd felt it vaguely when they talked, but she was certain now that it was too heavy a responsibility for a ten-year-old girl to bear.

But she couldn't just stop at preventing the kingdom's collapse.

She needed to ensure a future where the people could live in peace.

It's as if I'm...

The sole determiner of Heilland's fate. The absolute guardian of the people.

There was only one title bestowed upon such a person.

"Clovis, are you saying I should become Heilland's ruler?"

A scream from outside interrupted them before he could answer. The carriage ground to a halt.

"Wh-What?"

"Your Highness, please forgive this transgression."

Before Alicia could look out the window, Clovis pulled her into his arms, his gaze sharp as he monitored the outside with caution. After a moment, Robert's voice sounded from outside the carriage door.

"Young master, this is Ron. May I open the door?"

"Yes."

The door opened a sliver, and Robert peeked in. After ensuring that no one outside could see them, he dropped the pretense of a servant.

"Sorry. A child was almost run over by the carriage behind us. We'll be moving again right away."

"Wait!" Alicia called out before the knight could withdraw, a sense of unease building inside her. "Is the child all right?"

"Oh, yes, well. They are fine."

Unconvinced by the silver-haired knight's vague smile, Alicia pulled herself

from Clovis's arms and pushed the carriage door wide open.

Her gut instinct was right.

It was late evening, and the road outside was congested, so they hadn't made much progress and were close to where they'd said goodbye to Edmund. Alicia's sky-blue eyes widened as her gaze landed on the child and the carriage that had almost run her over.

She knew them. Edmund stood before the carriage with his hands spread wide. A girl held a small black kitten in her arms, and the others cowered on the ground around her.

She could guess what had happened.

The kids must have continued their search for the kitten after she left. They found it, but a scuffle probably ensued, and the kitten had jumped out into the busy road. The girl had given chase and was almost run over by the carriage right there.

A caretaker from the church dashed over, bowing to the carriage driver in a panic.

The children looked unhurt, and the carriage driver, though annoyed, did not raise his voice. Things seemed to be all right. However, the door to the luxurious carriage suddenly flew open, and someone poked his head out.

Robert groaned as he caught sight of the noble.

"Of all people, it has to be Riddhe Sutherland..."

Riddhe Sutherland, member of the inspection squad and heir to the dukedom of Sheraford, stepped out of the carriage with a scowl while twirling a strand of his red hair on a finger.

He snorted as he surveyed the scene, unaware of the princess watching it all with bated breath. His hand still playing with his hair, his eyes landed on the children who dared to halt his carriage.



RIDDHE was in a foul mood.

As the successor to the dukedom, he seldom had time to visit the royal capital. Since he had some rare business with the district council today, he had no choice but to endure the long carriage ride here.

However, there had been some miscommunication, which led to a lack of some necessary documents, and his own short temper had gotten him into an argument with the council members. His arduous journey had resulted in nothing.

His House might have the most clout in the Privy Council, but that didn't seem to mean anything to Heiland's government officials. Riddhe was peeved, which was unfortunate both for him and the children.

"Al, didn't I tell you that I want to get home quickly?" the future duke asked sarcastically, shrugging his shoulders in feigned indifference. The carriage driver bowed his head.

"I apologize. There's been some trouble..."

"My lord, it is our fault!!"

"Hmm...?"

Despite knowing what had happened, Riddhe deliberately kept silent, his gaze traveling between the trembling child crouched on the ground and the pale caretaker. Only one of the kids dared to look directly at him. Riddhe frowned.

This would not do. Really. Not at all.

Riddhe thumped the flashy, carved cane in his hand on the ground several times. It was his unlucky day. Why couldn't he even get home without coming across trouble?

He was justified in finding an outlet for his displeasure.

"Oi, woman. Do you know who I am? You look like the caretaker of that bunch of orphans. Do you think you're fit to block the way of a duke's son?"

"My deepest apologies. We seek your forgi—"

"I'm to forgive you just like that? How impudent." He lifted the face of the caretaker with his cane as she crouched over the terrified children, and Riddhe let out a devious laugh. "So, how shall we do this? All I have to do is snap my

fingers, and all the churches in this town will be closed down.”

“No...!”

“Then what can you offer me to prevent that?”

Riddhe’s grin widened as the caretaker’s face turned pale and she trembled. Smirking, he leaned near the woman’s ear and whispered so that no one else could hear.

“Are you going to grovel on the ground and apologize for your rudeness? Or are you going to satisfy me with your body? Hm? Just let me have a look; it won’t be that bad. I can even pay you a little money for it.”

The young woman’s ears turned red with shame, to Riddhe’s slight satisfaction.

Of course, he couldn’t take advantage of the woman in that way. Not that the church would ever dare raise its voice against the House of Sutherland, but things could get troublesome if anything happened. Most importantly, it would not be good for his reputation to be seen threatening and forcing a woman to get into his carriage.

The future duke knew his limits. To the woman’s surprise, he drew away with a derisive snort and was about to get back into his carriage when a young boy’s voice sounded sharply from behind him.

“...Apologize.”

Riddhe Sutherland had made a mistake. He’d never thought it was possible for a powerless commoner to talk back to someone of his standing.

Therefore, Riddhe didn’t understand the youth’s words at first. However, he sensed the turbulent atmosphere coming from the commoners behind him, and he stopped and turned around.

“I thought I heard something. What is it now?”

“I said, apologize!!”

There was no way he could miss it that time. Riddhe flinched in shock. As expected, the one who had yelled at the future duke was the boy who had been glaring up at him earlier.

Riddhe had no way of knowing that this boy was Edmund. Ignoring the pale-faced caretaker who was desperately holding him back, Edmund glared at Riddhe as he stalked up to the man.

“We’re sorry for dashing out into the road like that, but...your words are too much!! Apologize to her now!!”

A commoner, a child no less, was challenging him. It was such an impossible concept to Riddhe that he stood stunned for a moment before his rage boiled up. His neck and even the tips of his ears grew red.

“Street rat...! Who do you think you’re talking to?!” he yelled at the boy.

However, Edmund didn’t show a shred of fear.

“You’re a coward! You know she can’t talk back, so you said whatever you wanted. If you don’t apologize now, I’ll let everyone here know what disgusting things you said to her!”

“Wha—?!”

Unfortunately, Edmund’s threat hit the nail on the head. It would be endlessly humiliating for Riddhe to have a scandal arise from such a petty issue. However, Riddhe was not known for his patience, nor was he the type to take being threatened by a commoner lying down. Faced with that, he flew into a rage.

“How dare you, you dirty little commoner!!”

“Edmund!!”

One of the children screamed in fear.

Blinded by rage, Riddhe raised his gorgeously carved cane at Edmund. The image of the courageous boy’s head cracked open and bleeding out flashed through the minds of the caretaker and the children.

Just then, a voice as light as a nightingale’s rang out.

“Clovis, stop him!!”

“As you wish!”

A black figure jumped before Edmund just as he screwed his eyes shut and spun away. The dull sound of wood colliding with wood cracked out as Riddhe’s

cane was blocked by another.

“Clo?!”

Clovis had jumped in front of Edmund and caught Riddhe Sutherland’s cane. The future duke’s eyes, previously filled with rage, now opened wide in shock.

“Cromwell?! Why are you here?!”



“It’s been a while,” Clovis responded, calm violet eyes trained on his opponent.

Surprised, Riddhe lowered his cane numbly, stepping back and away from Clovis.

He didn’t understand.

The last time they met was during the recognition ceremony, when Riddhe had left the castle boiling over with anger because the other man had received the coveted appointment as the princess’s adviser.

As a noble who would become part of the Privy Council one day, he had been outraged by the appointment. That said, Cromwell should be in the castle now, serving Princess Alicia. Why was he here in town? And protecting commoners, no less?

Then, a young girl’s clear voice rang out again, adding to his confusion.

“Could you please keep your anger in check?”

Over the shoulder of his black-haired enemy, Riddhe spotted a small girl standing in a dignified manner. The hood covering her face made it hard to read her expression, but he sensed her strong gaze hidden deep within the shadows, staring right at him.

Seeing Riddhe’s shock, the young girl continued to speak. “You are not wrong to be upset, but these children are my dear friends. If there was any disrespect shown, I apologize on their behalf.”

“Alice? You—”

“Edmund.” The young girl cut Edmund off before the confused boy could say more, though her voice was gentle. It was clear she cared deeply for the children and their caretaker. “Everyone, this is an acquaintance of mine. I’m terribly sorry if he has scared you or hurt you with harsh words. And you look so pale; he must have said something awful to you.”

Those words finally broke the tension as the caretaker started to weep.

Riddhe raised his voice in an attempt to stop her cries. “Wait! What are you going on about?!” Riddhe asked. “You say you know me?!”

“No more disgraceful behavior from you, boy, though I won’t be sorry if you end up cutting your own throat.”

The driver of the girl’s carriage had entrusted the horse to someone and joined in the fray. Riddhe got even more confused when he recognized the man dressed in servant’s attire.

Silvery hair flowing in the wind and a well-toned body combined with a flawless form. Wasn’t this Robert von Belt, a fellow member of the inspection squad and current vice captain of the Imperial Guard?

A terrifying notion surfaced in Riddhe’s mind.

His gaze whipped between Clovis Cromwell and Robert von Belt, then slowly settled on the young girl. The usual snobbish smirk on his handsome face disappeared as he turned pale.

It was impossible. It couldn’t be. Even as he tried to deny the possibility, the rational part of Riddhe’s mind warned him not to cross the girl before him.

Even with the hood over her face, the girl’s demeanor shone with nobility and strong willpower. Her voice, as clear as a nightingale’s, issued commands without hesitation, with a power that naturally urged everyone to obey.

“Y-You can’t be...?!” Riddhe stammered as a bead of sweat trailed down his cheek.

“It’s been a while since you came before Father and me.”

A breeze kicked up, and the girl’s charcoal grey hood lifted. In that moment, Riddhe saw the beautiful sky-blue eyes and matching hair hidden beneath. His body stiffened as the princess, known as the Blue Rose of Heiland, smiled sweetly. He was probably imagining it, but something cold spread down his back.

What was she doing here in town?

And those commoner kids were her friends? What kind of joke was this?

“Princess Alicia...?!”

“Hush!”

The princess just lifted a finger to her lips, stopping Riddhe before he could voice any of the million questions running through his head. Then she winked at him, as if the two of them were sharing a secret.

“I’m Alice for today. But let’s settle the matter here now. Don’t you agree that that is for the best?”

Despite the princess’s innocent smile, Riddhe knew that she would report any further disturbances right to her father, the king. The thought made him shudder.

“Young master...”

His servant was looking at him worriedly, but he didn’t have time to care about that. Swallowing his panic, he thought desperately.

What should he do? He had to get out of this predicament somehow.

Silence stretched between them for a few long moments before Riddhe shoved his cane into Clovis, then moved to stand before the children and their caretaker before bowing deeply. Robert, who was watching the scene, gave a low whistle of appreciation.

“I apologize. I will make up for today in some way.”

Riddhe’s deep bow hid his humiliated expression and gritted teeth, though they didn’t stem from any regret in his heart.

Having shown the bare minimum of decorum in a voice that dragged its way out of his throat, Riddhe straightened, turned, and climbed back into his carriage. Slamming the door without a backward glance, he yelled out an irate command.

“I’m going home, Al! Start driving right now!”

“Yes!”

With a jolt, Riddhe’s carriage moved down the road again.

Resting his chin in his hand as he looked out the window of the swaying carriage, Riddhe frowned sullenly. What horrible luck did he have today? A worthless trip into the capital, disrespectful behavior from the commoners, a confrontation with that distasteful black dog.

And on top of all that, the princess.

A lovely princess who was neither bad nor good. Now that he thought about it, she seemed different these days. Not only did she favor that irritating Cromwell, she had, without a care, jeopardized his good reputation as the heir of the House of Sutherland, one of the heavyweights in the kingdom's Privy Council.

Princess Alicia... Don't think that I'll take this lying down.

Muttering curses at his defeat, it was a while before Riddhe realized that Clovis still had his cane.

It was delivered to the Sutherland residence a few days later, sent by the princess. How Riddhe snapped the hapless item while venting his anger was a story for another day.



"SHALL I pour you some tea, Your Highness?" Annie asked, teapot in hand.

"Some of Your Highness's favorite pastries are here, too," Martha added, holding a plate full of baked pastries as she peered at Alicia's face.

"Oh, no. I'm fine for now. Thanks," was Alicia's mindless response. She sighed heavily, seated on a chair by the window, looking outside.

Maintaining smiles on their faces, the two maids silently edged away from the princess and towards her adviser, who was standing by the door.

"Hey! What's all this about, Lord Clovis?!"

"She left the castle in such high spirits; why is she so downhearted now?!"

The maids surrounded Clovis, their happy smiles replaced by frightening glares. Clovis's eyebrow twitched.

Their reaction was justified. The princess was supposed to return from her trip radiant, declaring how much fun she had while outside, but now she looked depressed.

"You are the only one who knows what happened."

"Come on, do something to help our princess."

With pressure from the two maids ramping up, Clovis sighed and moved to stand by his mistress, who was staring blankly out the window.

He knew why she was upset and decided to be direct, gazing out the window as well.

“Things will be all right. Ed will surely understand.”

The princess nodded before her timid, sky-blue eyes turned to look up at him.

“Do you really think so?” Alicia asked dejectedly.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he replied with a smile.



“**DID** you lie to us?”

After Riddhe Sutherland’s hasty departure, Alicia apologized to the children again, not only for the disrespect shown by a prestigious House representing the Privy Council but also for the lies about her identity.

In the end, she never clarified her true status as the princess, but judging by her relationship with Clovis, who followed her every order, and her conversation with Riddhe Sutherland, it was easy to guess who she really was.

The caretaker and the other children stood shocked, but Edmund reacted differently.

“You too, Clo, you lied that she’s your sister.”

“I’m sorry. I had to say it to protect Her Highness.”

With a sad yet accusing glare, Edmund turned and dashed away, heedless of the other children crying for him to come back.



I understand, Edmund. You were so happy to learn that Clovis has family to rely on, just like yourself.

Alicia’s grip on her dress tightened as she recalled Edmund’s startled look when Clo introduced her as his sister and how he shared his happy memories with such fervor. She hadn’t meant to do it, but the reality was that they had lied to Edmund.

And thanks to her, he was even mad at Clovis. What would she do if this destroyed their friendship?

She gazed upon the rows of houses with their orange roofs. They had been much more beautiful up close than looking down at them from the castle, maybe because they were colored by the people's smiles.

"I knew it. I'm as bad at engaging the townspeople as I was in my previous life," the princess said with a bitter smile as she shook her head, her sky-blue hair flowing with the movement.

Just then, her adviser caught sight of something outside the window.

"...I think it's too soon for Your Highness to say that."

Following his line of sight, Alicia spotted Robert running over from the watchtower, his silver hair flowing behind him.



ALICIA dashed down the spiral staircase, holding her hem up so she wouldn't trip. Clovis was right behind her.

Her soft cheeks were flushed and her breathing quick, perhaps due to anxiety, but she didn't slow down. Passing soldiers and officers tilted their heads, wondering what was going on. Alicia finally reached the watchtower above the main gate.

"Edmund!!"

Alicia braced both hands against the castle wall and leaned forward, catching sight of the boy she'd met at the market. He was there with the church kids and their caretaker, all looking up at her from the bottom of the wall.

"It's Alice!"

"She's not Alice, stupid. She's Princess Alicia!"

"Wow! She really is a princess!"

The church kids waved at her happily. Only Edmund stood silent and sullen among them, and Alicia couldn't help but call out.

"I'm sorry, I—"

“Hey you!!”

Her words were cut off by Edmund’s shout as he looked up. He dawdled silently, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly. Then he fixed Alicia with a strong gaze.

Robert, who had announced their arrival, leaned against the wall as well, chin in his hand, as he smiled down at Edmund.

“What’s wrong, boy? You refused to leave until you saw these two; where did that determination go? Oh, if only the princess could see how desperately you —”

“Hey, whoa, stop!!”

A red-faced Edmund yelled, cutting off Robert. Then he took a deep breath and looked up at Alicia, who had been waiting with bated breath.

“Thank you!”

Alicia’s sky-blue eyes widened at the unexpected words.

“You were really cool when you reprimanded that guy earlier! Thank you for protecting all of us.”

“But I lied to you...”

Alicia lowered her eyes sadly as her small hands gripped the wall. But Edmund tore at his hair, frustrated.

“Argh, I don’t care about that now!! As long as you truly care about Clo, then I don’t care. What you said to me, those weren’t lies, right?”

“What did you say to him, Your Highness?”

Surprised that he was the topic of conversation, her adviser narrowed his eyes curiously and looked at Alicia. The princess just looked up at his face, silent.

“Of course I like him.”

When Edmund had asked what she thought of Clovis, her answer had been sincere. With a nod, Alicia shouted back at the boy outside the wall.

“Of course not!”

“In that case, we’re still friends!”

Lit by the orange setting sun, he broke into a huge grin. His words echoed in Alicia’s heart, making it leap.

“But I’m still mad at you, Clo! Next time you come to town, you’re gonna treat me to a big meal, so get ready for that!!” he shouted, his eyes crinkling with amusement as he pointed up at Clovis.

“What?!”

Everyone laughed, though Alicia’s heart continued to beat fast.

Edmund wasn’t talking to Alice, a fake persona, but to Princess Alicia.

He had called her a friend.

“Princess Alicia!”

“Clo!”

“Thank you!”

The caretaker bowed as the children took turns calling out their goodbyes, waving the whole time.

Alicia was on the verge of tears, so she retreated into the shadows of the wall, hiding her face. Seeing this, her adviser gave a gentle smile.

“It seems like you aren’t bad at engaging the townspeople, after all.”

“...You knew this was going to happen, and now you’re making me cry.”

“As long as Your Highness knows that it is my duty to celebrate your achievements,” Clovis answered respectfully, a hand upon his chest as he gazed upon her. “Not to subdue, but to gather.”

A breeze blew between them, carrying with it the echo of the children’s laughter and the banter between Robert and Edmund. Even so, the low voice of her adviser rang clearly in the princess’s ears.

“To stand side by side with the people instead of ruling over them... A country where the people’s hearts are divided will perish. In order to avoid such a future, don’t you think, as its ruler, that this is essential?”

A strong wind picked up, making Alicia's sky-blue hair dance.

She couldn't look away from the young man before her, his black hair flowing in the wind as he stood in the setting sun's rays. His serious expression made it clear that this was not a joke. There was no evading this.

Strangely enough, Alicia's heart calmed. The future of the kingdom was in her hands. She had realized that such a day would eventually arrive, ever since the responsibility was entrusted to her by the messenger of the stars.

Could she really take this on?

Her father. Beloved for his chubby and kind appearance, who was praised as the wise king for the depth of his heart and his excellent foresight.

The neighboring ruling empress. Feared for her severe personality, who ruled over a huge empire with overwhelming charisma and unmatched skill.

Alicia was surrounded by such great people.

And yet...

And yet, I will not turn a blind eye to it anymore.

The moment she watched Riddhe whisper something to the woman, which made her turn pale, she'd decided. And when Edmund stood up against the noble, even as his clenched fists trembled with fear.

She had turned her back on the citizens once, pretending not to see her kingdom fall to ruin. She would not abandon them a second time.

She must not.

To let her heart beat only for love, to only look upon beautiful or beloved things. Such was the life of a normal girl, but it was not to be hers.

She was born a princess, and with it came other things that she could achieve. She could make the right choice this time.

"Oh," Alicia muttered to herself. It seemed that she'd already made up her mind long ago. "I'll do it."

From where they stood, the town was dyed in the colors of the setting sun, yet Alicia looked straight up at her adviser with unwavering eyes and a regal

smile.

Clovis thought she looked so strong, her expression so determined and beautiful, that it was hard to believe she was just ten years old.

“I’ll be this kingdom’s next ruler,” she declared. “I may know a little bit of the future, but I’m not terribly intelligent nor talented in any way.”

“Your Highness needs not worry about that,” her black-haired adviser answered with a brilliant smile. “If you ever require help, I will be here to aid you as best as I can.”

Alicia nodded in satisfaction as she gazed at him.

“I’ll be counting on you then, my lord adviser?”

“Yes. It is my pleasure to serve.”

Slowly, the sky took on an indigo shade, and the first stars started to shine.

A small princess and a handsome young man who met by chance. The gears of history surrounding these two started to turn again, moving towards another new future.

6. Trials for the Blue Rose

EGDIEL, the royal capital, is beautiful with its red and orange roofs. Towering right in its center was Egdiel Castle, a gorgeous structure with historic architecture that nonetheless did not seem dated or old.

Once a military base, the castle was now home to the royal family, acting as the political and cultural center of Heilland. Now, a girl with shining blue hair dashed down one of its corridors.

“Let’s go, Clovis! We need to gather more information about the North!”

“At your service, Your Highness.”

Leading the way with courage was Alicia Chester, the lovely princess of Heilland, and following behind her like a prim and proper watchdog was Clovis Cromwell, a handsome black-haired young man who was the princess’s adviser.

To a stranger, the girl might seem selfish, dragging her retainer around the castle on a whim, but that was far from the truth.

The castle staff, always fond of the princess, or rather, completely charmed by her loveliness, watched the familiar scene with warmth in their eyes. This was hardly the first time Alicia and her adviser carved out some time from their busy schedules to meet up and head to the library.

Nigel Otto, the king’s chief adviser and right-hand man and the kingdom’s top official well-versed in politics, military affairs, and diplomacy, observed the princess and retainer hurry away, pushing his silver-rimmed glasses up his nose...



“**WHAT’S** this, Nigel? Are you trying out a new look with those glasses? You look nice, but maybe you should reserve that appeal for your lady wife.”

“Very funny, Your Majesty. You were the one who gave them to me out of

pity after seeing how much I struggled when looking at documents.”

With a scoff at King James’s jest, Nigel pushed the glasses up his nose again. Then he let out a heavy sigh.

“I’ve been feeling my age keenly these days. It’s getting hard to read small print, I lose my breath climbing stairs, and drinking too much alcohol makes me feel awful.”

“And that’s why I gave you those glasses. I can’t have my reliable right-hand man misread documents and have his talents hindered. There’s a saying about how we have to work these old bones harder as we age,” King James said with a merry laugh, half hidden from view behind a tall stack of documents.

“My apologies, Your Majesty, I have said too much. If I am old, then Your Majesty must be ancient,” Nigel retorted in a flat tone.

He was only approaching forty; surely calling him old was a little rude.

That said, it might be time to start thinking about appointing a successor. Of course, Nigel intended to serve the king as long as he was needed, but there was always the possibility that he would wake up one day and find himself unable to work.

Fortunately, the current officers of the advisory office were not particular about who their next leader would be. Thinking of the faces of all his subordinates, the scene that jumped out at Nigel was the one he’d witnessed on his way here.

“By the way, Your Majesty, I spotted Her Highness while I was making my way here. She was with Cromwell, and they were both headed to the library.”

“Ooh, she’s really working hard.”

Peering through his glasses, Nigel saw that the king was beaming happily. Dissatisfied with the king’s vague response, Nigel risked another question.

“The princess has changed lately, especially after she came back from her inspection of the castle town. She is suddenly so enthusiastic about gathering information about the kingdom.”

“Hmm, I wonder if something happened...”

The king stared blankly at the ceiling, though his almond-colored eyes were sparkling with satisfaction. It was obvious that he was considering sharing a fun secret with Nigel.

After several minutes of patient waiting, the king finally clapped his hands once.

“Oh, yes. Cia has informed me of her decision to become Heilland’s next ruler.”

“...Pardon?”

Nigel’s mouth dropped open. He had been serving by the man’s side for the ten-plus years since James ascended to the throne, so he should have gotten used to the outrageous things his master sometimes threw his way.

“Oh, well, when did that happen?”

“Hmm, I think it was the night after she came back from the castle town inspection.”

Nigel nodded several times as he pondered the king’s words... Then, his indigo blue eyes suddenly widened, shock plain on his usually warm, intelligent face.

“How many times have I requested for Your Majesty to tell me quickly! Promptly! Regarding important matters like these?!”

“Whoa there, Nigel. I’ve not seen you so agitated in ages.”

“And who is the cause of that?! Anyway, I’m not young anymore; please don’t shock me like this!”

Nigel took several deep breaths, embarrassed at his outburst. True, he used to speak frankly to his mischievous and playful master in their younger days, but he was a man with a reputation to uphold now. It would not do to stray too far from proper decorum.

With a hearty laugh, the king looked at his adviser with joyful eyes, happy that he’d succeeded in shocking the other man.

“I think you already know that I’m hoping for Cia to succeed me. It’s just that she is now the one volunteering herself.”

“So, what did Your Majesty say to her?” Regaining his composure, Nigel asked the most important question.

As King James mentioned, he had been considering naming Princess Alicia as his heir for quite some time. Thus far, Nigel was the only one privy to the king’s intentions.

The reason for the secrecy was that it would be an unprecedented appointment. The women who managed to ascend to the throne and rule Heiland in its long history were few and far between. Due to that, the Privy Council and most of the nobility believed strongly that Alicia’s future husband would become the kingdom’s heir.

The king had never openly disproved everyone’s assumptions. As for Princess Alicia’s education, which clearly included subjects a mere queen consort would never need, King James had explained vaguely that there was always a chance that Alicia might have to take the throne temporarily.

Though, until recently, King James had all but given up on the cause.

The princess herself had been the problem. She treated her subjects fairly and was loved by everyone for her honest and straightforward personality, making her the perfect royal princess. However, she had been too naive.

A lovely, rose-like princess who knew no corruption and never doubted others. Although it made her virtuous, it was not what a ruler should be like. In addition, she hated studying, which made her path to being a ruler that much more tedious.

But now, the princess had changed, most probably from the moment she appointed Clovis as her adviser.

Her previous childish and fun-loving demeanor was gone. Now, she worked hard at the studies she used to hate and observed everything with an intelligent gaze. Her attitude towards everyone had also changed. She was no longer just a girl, but a princess.

Nigel did not know what Alicia saw through her sky-blue eyes, but he knew that something had sparked within her.

“How did Your Majesty respond to Her Highness’s offer to become the next

ruler?" he asked again.

"I told her I can't agree yet."

It was the response Nigel expected.

If Princess Alicia was a boy, this would never be a problem. But the princess was female, and for the king to name her as his heir, she would have to prove that she was up to the task.

First, she had to convince the nobility who would serve as her vassals. Then, she also had to be acknowledged by the ruler of neighboring Erdal.

Erdal's empress had long hinted that she wanted a betrothal between her son, crown prince Fritz, and Princess Alicia. It could be her intention to make Fritz king of Heilland while she continued to reign over Erdal. And when the time came for her to step down, she would call Fritz back to Erdal and make him ruler of both countries. Then, all they needed would be a loyal Erdalian prime minister to govern Heilland, and it would all be perfect.

The empress's wish to take over Heilland was so blatant that King James had never allowed Princess Alicia and Prince Fritz to meet.

"I will name Cia as heir after she has proven herself, though it would be a major pain trying to stop my dear cousin from interfering," the king said in a joking voice, though his words were rational and precise.

He had always been this way. Kind, calm, but playful. Nigel respected and admired his master for his morality and wisdom, but it was unsettling sometimes to witness just how well he could predict the future.

One of the reasons why the fierce Erdalian empress had not yet tried to invade Heilland was her current focus on the domestic situation. However, more importantly, she had refrained thus far out of respect for King James.

It reminded Nigel of a giant chessboard. The two rulers, so different in terms of personality and governing style, were actually similar deep down. Both were farsighted, predicting each other's moves and quietly moving their pieces far beyond anything Nigel could imagine.

A sudden shiver ran down his spine, and Nigel quickly shrugged his shoulders

to shake off the feeling.

“Your Majesty is not helping either. Isn’t it too severe a trial to have our lovely princess take this on without any guidance?”

“Oh, but I have already set the stage for my beloved daughter to shine. As a parent, don’t we just feel the need to help?”

Like a dignified, blooming blue rose, the princess had made an unwavering decision.

She wanted to forge her own path.

Nigel shivered, overtaken by an emotion different from the reverence he held for the king. He could see the princess’s noble and beautiful figure as she stood up for Clovis during the recognition ceremony for the inspection squad.

Suddenly, he wanted to see the kingdom’s crown sparkling on top of her sky-blue hair.

“Besides, Cia has that excellent adviser by her side. I’m really interested in seeing what they will do. Let us see what skills my beloved child will show us.”

Princess Alicia and adviser Clovis. For some reason, Nigel felt the excitement of seeing history being made before his eyes.

7. Jude Nicol, the Marquis of Rozen

“**PLEASE** name me as your heir.”

“I cannot agree to that right now.”

That was her father’s answer to her direct request. It was an ambiguous reply, neither denial nor affirmation, but the king at least seemed open to the idea.

And that was all Alicia needed.

Of course, such an important matter related to the kingdom’s future wouldn’t be accepted without question. Besides, the king only stated that he couldn’t agree right *now*, which meant that he might change his mind.

I have to prove myself worthy first. That’s what Father wants to see.

In the face of that overwhelming trial, her heart burned bright with determination.

“So, what can I do...? You mentioned something about ‘abolishing the appointment of ranks based on social standing’ after the mission to Erdal. Is that something we can work on?”

That day, their scheduled daily report turned into a strategy planning meeting. Alicia asked that after reviewing everything they’d talked about, but her adviser shook his head.

“As His Majesty has mentioned, there are still too many obstacles we need to tackle before we can attempt such reform in Heilland. If we are thinking long-term, perhaps Your Highness can work on it once you become ruler.”

“I see...”

Alicia rested her cheek on her table, disappointed. She thought it was a great idea, but if the original author of the proposal felt this way, then surely it’d be too difficult an undertaking right now.

“If I may change the topic, how about we start with this?” Clovis held out a

bundle of papers from under his arm. “The contents may be difficult to understand, but I’m sure Your Highness will be interested in reading them.”



“A proposal from a territory that was rejected by the district council?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Alicia looked up from the document with her head tilted, but the black-haired young man just smiled. Every single day, Clovis’s charm and good looks, which always caught the gazes of the noble ladies during court balls, were showered generously on his mistress in the form of loyalty. When the perfect, superhuman Clovis, with his attractive face, intelligent mind, and strong athletic body, smiled at a girl, she would fall in love right away.

Only Princess Alicia was immune to his charm. She was busy wondering why her adviser would show her a rejected proposal.

“So Dreyfus and the other district council officials looked through it and found no need to submit it to the advisory office?” she confirmed.

“Yes. However, Lord Dreyfus is a man who goes by the book. I was looking through the rejects for any hidden gems that had been discarded too soon.”

So that was how Clovis came across the proposal. Intrigued as to what caught her excellent adviser’s eye, Alicia turned her gaze to the document in her hands.

Her previous self would have been repulsed by long, flowing lines of text and chucked the document aside after a glance. However, she was no longer that kind of person.

How should she prove herself worthy to rule? Alicia had pored through all sorts of documents related to domestic affairs in search of the answer. So reading this proposal written by a district noble shouldn’t be too hard!

...Several minutes passed in silence after Alicia flipped open the proposal with enthusiasm. Then she turned, with dejected and tearful eyes, to her black-haired adviser.

“...Um, Clovis?”

Clovis gave a respectful bow, as if anticipating her reaction. “Don’t worry,

Your Highness. Reading and comprehension are two different things. Now, if I may explain the contents in a simple way.”

Alicia felt horrid, but it couldn’t be helped. No matter how much she tried, she was just a ten-year-old girl. Pushing aside the urge to sulk, Alicia gathered her thoughts and posed her first question.

“First, who wrote this?”

“Jude Nicol, marquis of Rozen.”

Alicia tilted her head at the name, sure she’d heard it before. After a moment, she gasped. “That’s right. Wasn’t that the nobleman who came up during the surprise test Nigel gave you?”

Clovis’s almond-shaped eyes widened. “You have remembered well.”

That wasn’t the only thing Alicia remembered.

Jude Nicol.

The noble hated by district commissioner Dreyfus, who routinely sent proposals to the advisory office asking for his territory to be confiscated.

The marquisate of Rozen... I’ve done some research on it recently too.

Racking her brain for all the information she’d gathered from her numerous recent trips to the library, Alicia recalled what she knew about the marquisate.

The marquisate of Rozen was located in the northeastern part of Heiland. Most of the land consisted of unpopulated, gentle mountains, with some areas bordering the sea. A port town called Held, situated on the coast next to the open ocean, was a major trading hub and gathering point for both locals and foreigners, goods, and finance.

House Nicol, a prestigious noble family with a long history, governed the marquisate of Rozen. Jude, the current head of the house, was a young man just past thirty but already notorious for being an eccentric.

“When I was reading through this proposal, which was rejected by the district council, I came across some interesting things...” Clovis explained. “However, it’s difficult to ascertain the truth of the matter, which could be why the council rejected it.”

“So, what does it say? Keep it simple,” Alicia emphasized as she looked up at him. Her interest had been piqued for some time, and she was growing impatient.

With a smile, Clovis summarized the proposal simply and accurately, exactly the way she wanted. “The marquis proposes to establish a wide-area trading company specializing in the circulation of goods, spanning across all territories of the noble houses regardless of boundaries. He’s saying that this will save the kingdom’s future.”



SEVERAL weeks later, Alicia and Clovis journeyed to the marquisate of Rozen.

Her last trip out of the castle had been a short one to the castle town, but now she was leaving the capital and staying away from home for a bit. Despite the chief lady-in-waiting’s fainting and her maids’ frantic panic at the suggestion, King James readily agreed to his daughter’s expedition.

After leaving the royal capital, Alicia’s entourage progressed slowly through the vast wilderness of Heiland. The entourage consisted of two carriages: one carrying Alicia and Clovis and the other carrying Annie and Martha. Security was provided by knights of the Imperial Guard under Robert’s command, traveling ahead of and behind the carriages.

“I’ve troubled everyone, haven’t I?” Alicia asked apologetically, shrinking into herself.

“We are traveling with a political purpose, so we can’t go incognito,” Clovis assured her.

He was right. They were heading to the marquisate of Rozen on an important mission.

After looking through the proposal, Alicia and Clovis discussed it at length and decided that it would be best to talk to Jude in person. At first, she thought about summoning Jude to the castle, but Clovis disagreed with the idea.

“The head of House Nicol is a marquis, but strangely, he isn’t a member of the Privy Council. It’s said that the heads of that house have always disliked mingling with the other nobles. The current head is known to feel especially

strongly about this, so there is a chance that he will refuse to come, even should Your Highness demand it.”

Taking his advice, Alicia decided that they would visit the marquis so that he had no way of escaping her. Even Jude wouldn’t be able to blow off something as major as a princess’s visit, and they had received a reply that the marquis would be waiting for them.

Alicia was nervous. This would be her first time meeting the man, and it didn’t help that he didn’t seem welcoming.

“What if he tells me to go back to the castle as soon as we arrive?”

“That won’t happen. I have already informed the household that we will be staying for a few days... Besides, I will not allow anyone to disrespect my mistress that way.”

Alicia grimaced as her adviser’s beautiful amethyst gaze turned sharp. She prayed with all her heart that Jude would be welcoming.

“By the way, Your Highness. Take a look, the scenery here is beautiful.”

Her adviser tried to help his frazzled mistress calm down as he pulled the curtain aside and gestured for her to take a look.

It worked. Alicia glanced out the window and let out a happy gasp. The royal capital looked so small and far away, replaced by a vast grassland. The road continued straight, towards a gentle mountain range majestic enough to be the home of the gods.

It reminded Alicia of the beautiful boy she’d met in her dream...



THEY stopped to rest in a town along the way, then set off again the next day. Alicia’s entourage arrived at the Nicol family mansion in the Marquisate of Rozen just after noon.

It was a beautiful old stone castle located in the woods on the outskirts of the port town of Held. It looked different from the mansions built near the royal capital, which surprised Alicia.

And there, waiting in front of the mansion with his wife and retinue, was the

one Alicia had traveled all this way to see. Someone must have sent news of her entourage's arrival ahead of them.

"It is an honor to meet you. I am Jude, head of House Nicol."

The young noble lord bowed to Alicia and extended a hand for Clovis to shake. Alicia quietly sighed in relief. Jude seemed more welcoming than she'd expected.

That said, the noble was still vastly different from how she'd imagined him to be.

Alicia had imagined Jude to be a difficult man, judging by his dislike of the other nobles and his lack of participation in high society. But the man before her now, with his bright blond hair and dimples, seemed sweet and charming.

Relieved, Alicia failed to notice that Jude had bent down to take a closer look at her. Then he broke into a wide smile, surprising everyone present.

"Wow. The princess is more wonderful and cuter than the rumors suggest. The Blue Rose Princess? What a perfect name!"

"...My lord, shall we invite everyone inside first?"

"Oh, right."

Jude nodded obediently at his wife's quiet suggestion. As he stood up straight to lead the entourage indoors, Clovis stood before Alicia as if shielding her from something, which she thought to be quite charming.

"You must be tired after a long journey. Come in, over here." Jude smiled, showing off his white teeth as he waved them cheerfully into the mansion. "It must be rare for you to visit a port town like this. It would be a waste for us to talk in an enclosed room. So, how about we take an afternoon stro—"

"Please let us get to the important matters first."

Jude frowned in disappointment at Clovis's polite but determined response.

"What a unique man he is," Annie whispered in Alicia's ear.

Alicia was glad that her maid hadn't used the word "strange" to describe the noble lord, probably because she knew of all the hoops Alicia had jumped

through to come meet him.

The marquis of Rozen seems to like doing things his own way...

Somehow, Alicia had the feeling that the marquis would not get along well with the straitlaced Clovis.

As Jude proceeded to talk about the mansion's architecture, Alicia secretly prayed to the messenger of the stars, hoping that their discussion would proceed smoothly.



WITH the tour of the mansion done, the group now sat comfortably in a sunny common room that served as a large reception area. Lots of sunlight streamed in through the huge windows. Outside were the streets of Held, where traders lived, and Alicia's first glimpse of the blue horizon.

"So, I heard that you came here after reading the proposal I submitted to the district council." Seated across from Alicia and Clovis, Jude went straight to the point with a brilliant smile, his tone light as if they were discussing the weather.

Alicia started. The scenery had distracted her. She hurriedly nodded. "Oh, erm, yes. That's right." Clearing her throat, Alicia sat up straight. She had to appear in charge; otherwise, the young lord would sweep her off her feet before she knew what was happening. "Clovis here was the first one to read through your proposal."

"Oh? But hadn't the district council already rejected it?" Jude turned his gaze towards Clovis, a happy smile on his face. "Or perhaps they call you strange too?"

"Sometimes."

The marquis of Rozen frowned at Clovis's vague answer. Her adviser, however, leaned forward slightly, as if trying to regain control of the discussion.

"We are interested in your reasoning behind the proposal to establish a wide-area trading company specializing in the circulation of goods, Lord Nicol."

"Please call me Jude. And can I call you Clovis?" The marquis remained determined about that point until Clovis finally nodded.

“Heilland’s artisan industry, renowned for its ironware, textiles, and other handcrafted goods, faces the fate of losing out to foreign countries and becoming obsolete. That was what was written in your proposal,” Clovis said.

“How lovely! My proposals have always been rejected by the district council. No one has ever read through them before,” Jude’s green eyes sparkled as he spoke brightly. “But yes, I did write that. Don’t you agree?”

“A moment, please. We’d like you to tell us why you wrote that first,” Alicia interjected.

Of course, Clovis had already explained the details of Jude’s proposal to her, so she knew what mattered in this conversation. The most essential part was, namely, that Heilland’s proud industry would soon become obsolete.

The artisan industry in question was the very one that had been passed down through generations and the one that Alicia witnessed and interacted with during her inspection trip to the castle town. The exquisite techniques had amazed her, and she found Jude’s prediction hard to believe.

But Jude just looked confused.

“Tell you why? It’s easy to understand why; just talk to all the merchants at the port... Oh, I guess the princess can’t do that, huh?” Jude scratched at his cheek, genuinely seeming to notice just now that he was talking to the princess from the capital and her retainer rather than merchants or locals.

He seemed at a loss for words to explain until Clovis helped out. “I’ve heard that the goods imported from overseas have slowly improved in quality over the past ten years. Could that be the reason why?”

“Yes, yes, that’s it! And according to the merchants who travel to and from these other countries, they’re still growing steadily,” Jude exclaimed, throwing her adviser a look of gratitude.

Heilland’s artisanal culture had developed quickly and early in the kingdom’s history. The citizens were hardworking and down-to-earth, and coupled with the harsh natural environment, which made it difficult for agriculture, many chose to become artisans. That was why Heilland’s crafts had always fetched high prices, supported by the nobility’s tax systems, which benefited the

artisans.

“But because of this success,” Jude continued, “the production and sales of our goods have not evolved for hundreds of years. I don’t know how to say it nicely, but it’s old-fashioned.”

“In other words, the business run by each artisan is small, and the amount of work that can be ordered is limited,” Clovis summarized.

“Exactly,” Jude said with a snap of his fingers and a smile. “On the other hand, the countries across the seas have all started up their own industries, hoping to catch up with and overtake Heilland. Erdal is one such example. Huge businesses there have received the empress’s approval and are selling all manner of goods.”

If Heilland’s goods could retain their top quality, then this wouldn’t be an issue. In fact, the limited production would increase the rarity of the goods and keep them selling well.

However, the neighboring countries had caught up with Heilland’s technology and were now producing goods of similar quality. This left Heilland at an overwhelming disadvantage. The other countries, which could now provide goods of the same quality and price but at a faster pace, would start to overtake Heilland with their generous supply.

“You just need to talk to a merchant, and you’ll see the problem right away,” Jude said. “But all those nobles are only friends with each other, so of course they won’t know or care about any of this...” The young lord shook his head sadly, seemingly forgetting that the two seated before him were nobles (and royalty) themselves. Alicia could only nod, troubled by the information.

In the near future, Heilland’s artisan industry would decline due to the pressure of foreign development. It was a bold prediction from an eccentric who rarely showed his face in noble society.

“And your solution is for us to establish a wide-area trading company that specializes in the circulation of goods,” Clovis prompted.

The young lord gave a light shrug. “Oh, I’m just copying what Erdal’s Ist Trading Company does. Oh, the Ist Trading Company is a huge business that

sells various goods with the empress's approval."

The Ist Trading Company gathered information on the firms scattered across Erdal, acting as an intermediary to help sell the empire's goods to other countries. In short, it was the ultimate middleman.

The advantage was that it made ordering goods from Erdal easy. Dresses, cutlery—anything could be ordered, and the Ist Trading Company would match buyers with the perfect business to supply those items.

The system was also good for the businesses. By paying a commission, orders that couldn't be taken by individual businesses, such as those from royals or large noble houses, could now be accepted with the Ist Trading Company acting as the intermediary.

"I see. If Heiland can establish something like the Ist Trading Company, our commercial sphere will expand greatly," Clovis said.

Jude nodded joyfully. "Clovis, my dear Clo! You know just what I want to say before I even speak!"

"Clo...? No, you overestimate me."

Perhaps shocked by the nickname, Clovis lowered his eyes with humility.

And with this, they could finally confirm Jude's proposal.

He really doesn't seem to mind aimless discussions...

Alicia gazed meaningfully at Clovis, who nodded quietly. At that, the princess sat up straighter and faced the young lord.

"Lord Rozen, I think you already know this, but while your proposal makes sense, there is no evidence to back it up," she said, her voice firm.

"How harsh!" Jude gave a wry smile as he raised his hands as if in surrender.

"That was what the district council said too. Judging by the reports from the various territories, it's hard to imagine our artisan industry declining." Alicia continued to gaze at Jude with intelligent eyes. "Also, we must obtain approval from the noble houses in charge of all territories before we can carry out your proposal. The biggest challenge, of course, will be to convince the Privy Council."

“I guess so.” Jude nodded with an annoyed frown. “That type of company will need free access all over Heilland, regardless of territorial boundaries, but there is no way all the noble houses will agree to that. Also, they won’t be happy to see the companies in their territory paying commissions just to get business.”

“Yes. And that’s pretty much why the district council rejected your proposal,” Alicia concluded with a grave nod.

Now that it had all been said, she felt a sense of relief. Of course, most of that speech had been taught to her by her adviser in advance. But this was where the real challenge began. Pulling her wits about her once again, Alicia resumed speaking.

“But I still wish to use your idea. I plan to draft a motion based on your suggestions and bring it up for national discussion.”

“There, that’s it. That’s what I don’t understand.” Jude leaned forward, hands clasped before him. “But please, have some tea first.”

Even though they were engrossed in the conversation, he hadn’t forgotten to urge Alicia and Clovis to help themselves to the tea. Having spoken so much, Alicia gratefully took a sip from her cup.

After confirming that his guests were comfortable, Jude took some tea himself. Then he raised a teasing brow at Alicia.

“Pardon me for saying so, but I’m puzzled as to why you’re so interested in my proposal. You realize it’s already been rejected by the district council, right? It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Raising her small hand, Alicia held up two fingers. “I have two reasons. First, if this is successful, the benefits are great. It will be tough getting the Privy Council on our side, but if all goes well, we can promise a good future to the artisans of Heilland.”

Then Alicia lowered her gaze. “Secondly, it aligns with my personal desire. No matter how difficult it is to do so, I want to help my people.”

“Blinded by love, you have turned your back on the people, and this is the result.”

The sound of a man's voice dripping with rage rang in her ears.

She would not make the same mistake again.

The Poisonous Rose of Ruin. This past version of herself had taught her an important lesson. She couldn't turn a blind eye to even the slightest possibility that her people could face starvation. This time, she would make full use of her position as princess to do what she could. She swore it.

"...Hmm. You're a strange one yourself." The young lord stared at the princess, amazement in his gaze.

Clovis's violet eyes were trained on Jude, like a wolf zeroing in on its prey. "Lord Rozen, we need your help. We want you to be responsible for the establishment of the trading company."

"Huh?" Jude froze in the middle of reaching for his mug.

Taking this chance, the adviser pushed on.

"The trading company needs to be set up by someone with personal connections to the merchants and a sharp intuition that most other nobles simply do not possess. In other words, there is no better candidate than you."

"Just a minute!" Jude ran a panicked hand through his hair. "I'm just here to give advice. I even wrote a nice proposal, right? The Privy Council members should be the ones putting it into action."

Alicia's smile faltered at Jude's worried expression. Perhaps this lack of enthusiasm was why the district council rejected his proposal.

Beside her, Clovis continued his attack with patience. "Of course, we will help with any coordination. However, the trading company will need to have its headquarters somewhere. Since the company's mission is to strengthen foreign trade, the town of Held is the best place for it. And that puts it right in your territory."

"Only if we're trading by sea," Jude said. "There are surely other candidates to take care of the land routes, like Viola from the Duchy of Sheraford. Either way, I can't do it. The other nobles will never follow any plan led by Jude the eccentric."

“Lord Rozen!” The princess raised her voice as the young lord stood to leave. He looked uncertainly back at Alicia.

“I’m sorry, Princess Alicia. Truth be told, I’m not used to doing business like this.”

“It’s fine. I’m sorry for surprising you like that.” With a shake of her head, Alicia stood as well, looking up at the gentle young man. “I’ve heard the rumors, and I know you aren’t close to the other nobles, but that doesn’t bother me. I need your help.”

“Well, then how about this?” Jude nodded. “I can introduce you to as many reliable merchants as you need, and I’ll answer any questions you have regarding noble lords and how territories are governed. However, you must not appoint me as the leader. I’m saying this as a word of advice, because if you do, the plan will fail.”

With that, Jude hurried out of the room. Alicia tried to call out to him again, but Clovis stopped her.

“Let him have some time to think. We still have a few days before we need to return to the castle.”

“You’re right...” Alicia whispered in reply, staring at the door Jude escaped through.



DISCUSSIONS ended for that day.

However, they spent time with Lady Rozen, who told them about the lives of the people and the bustling trade in the port town of Held. She also showed them rare items from overseas, collected by the past lords of Rozen through the generations.

By the time they gathered for dinner, Jude was back to his usual cheerful and affable self. However, while he regaled his guests with stories he’d heard from the merchants from the East, he steadfastly blocked any attempt to talk about the proposal.

“We’ll have to try again tomorrow,” Alicia grumbled as she sank, exhausted,

onto the sofa in the guest chamber.

“Oh dear. Guess the negotiations fell through as expected,” Annie quipped.

Alicia was in the room with her two maids.

Clovis, Robert, and the other knights were staying in separate quarters from the women. Save for them, the mansion and the port town were guarded by the Northern Knight Division stationed in the marquisate of Rozen, so everyone could rest easy.

Puffing out her soft cheeks, the princess corrected her maid. “It didn’t fall through! ...And what do you mean by ‘as expected’?”

“Well...”

“About that...”

Annie and Martha shared a look. Noticing their expressions, Alicia tilted her head to the side.

“When I first saw him, he seemed like the type who does things his own way, but he’s quite approachable, isn’t he? I didn’t think he’d be so opposed to Your Highness’s plan,” Annie offered with a shrug.

“Anyway, Your Highness, he does seem to be doing a great job as marquis, but he sure doesn’t have the usual temperament of a noble,” Martha added.

“Lord Rozen does remind me of those merchants who come to the castle at times.”

“Yes, yes! That’s why I can’t imagine someone like him presenting his ideas to the stuffy nobles of the Privy Council.”

Alicia hadn’t realized that her maids were so sharp and observant of the people who visited the castle. She thought back to the conversation that afternoon.

“You must not appoint me as the leader, because if you do, the plan will fail.”

The marquis had been adamant about his refusal to help. Perhaps it wasn’t a matter of him not getting along with the other nobles. It sounded like he was shunned by his fellow lords.

Several nobles, including district commissioner Dreyfus, disliked Jude and saw him as a rebel because he didn't mingle in high society and hung around merchants instead. The conservatives in the Privy Council, especially, had warned Jude many times to respect his status as a noble and not disrupt the order of things.

"I wonder why Jude dislikes hanging out with the other nobles so much."

"Who knows..."

Her two maids looked at each other again. Then, Alicia had a sudden thought and stood up from the sofa. "I'm going to take a short stroll around the mansion. You two can turn in first."

"Huh?! But it's already so late, Your Highness!"

It wasn't that late, but her maids were being overprotective.

"The view of the sea from the reception room was really beautiful." Alicia smiled wryly. "I've never seen the sea before, so I want to see what it looks like at night. Please?" She clasped her hands together in front of her chest, and her maids nodded reluctantly.

Annie offered to go with her to keep her safe, but Alicia politely declined. She wanted time alone to gather her thoughts while looking out at sea. Besides, they were in a noble's mansion. There was nothing that could harm her here.

And so, Alicia left her room and headed towards the reception room, where they had held their discussion that afternoon. There, she could gaze out at the sea and think.

Or so she thought.

"Your Highness?!"

"Oh! If it isn't the princess!"

The reception room was already occupied. By three people, no less.

"Clovis! Robert, and Lord Rozen too?!"

As expected, Clovis was the first to react to the sight of a wide-eyed Alicia at the door. Jumping up from the sofa, he rushed to kneel before her.

“I apologize! Your Highness has been subjected to such an unsightly scene...!”

“Huh? Unsightly?”

“Hey, hey. Who’s unsightly here? Aren’t we just enjoying some grown-up time?”

Behind Clovis, Robert raised his rocks glass with a clink. Clovis shot a sharp glare at the man while still kneeling before Alicia.

“Her Highness is royalty,” Clovis said sternly. “It is outrageous to appear drunk in her presence!”

“Just a minute, calm down,” Robert said. “Open your pretty eyes and look. Who exactly is drunk over here?”

Robert was right. The three men appeared just as sober as they were during the day. Calming, Clovis remained on one knee, a blush coloring his handsome face.

“Good evening, Princess Alicia. I was the one who invited them for a drink. I thought it’d be fine, since it’s already nighttime and all... Are you upset?”

Like Robert, Jude raised his glass in greeting with an apologetic smile on his face. Even with his brows furrowed, the young lord was still charming with his dimpled smile. Beside him, Robert shrugged his shoulders.

“That guy over there was going to refuse our host’s gracious invitation, so I had to drag him here. He won’t drink, though. Not even a glass of whiskey, the pride of the marquise of Rozen, poured by Lord Jude himself.”

“Oh, but why not?” Alicia asked.

It was true. An untouched glass was placed in front of Clovis’s seat. Blinking in confusion, Alicia looked at her adviser with her sky-blue eyes.

“You can relax and enjoy, you know? Or perhaps you cannot take alcohol?” she asked.

“No, that is...”

“Nah, princess,” the silver-haired knight cut in as Clovis stumbled over his words. “He can drink. We’ve been working together for two years; I should

know. But Lord Stubborn says he's here on business and shouldn't drink."

Alicia looked back at her adviser again, but he averted his gaze. So Robert was speaking the truth, then. She laughed.

"Don't worry about that, Clovis. You have to relax sometimes, or you'll get tired."

"If you say so..."

"Perfect! Now Clo can sample our prized whiskey." A bottle of amber-colored liquid sat beside the smiling Jude. The seal of the marquise of Rozen was printed on the label, so she guessed that was the whiskey.

"May I join you?" Alicia asked. "... Don't look at me like that, Clovis. I promise I won't drink any alcohol." She reassured her adviser because his brow twitched. Her retainers were too overprotective. The other two men agreed heartily, and Alicia sat next to Clovis.

Jude summoned a maid to prepare some tea for Alicia. Worried that she had interrupted something, the princess accepted the warm drink gratefully.



JUDE, the head of House Nicol, knight Robert, adviser Clovis, and, strangely enough, Princess Alicia were all seated in the reception room.

Outside the large windows, there was a full moon. The round, white moon shining down on the distant sea was ethereal and beautiful.

"By the way, what were you talking about before I arrived?" Alicia asked innocently, teacup in hand.

The young lord leaned forward, a friendly smile on his face. "They were telling me about their mission to Erdal. I heard that they were there for two years! Oh, I'm so jealous."

"Oh, but Lord Jude is the amazing one." Robert lifted a brow and smiled, elegantly swirling the ice in his glass. He'd already had three glasses of whiskey since Alicia sat down, yet his face was bright without any hint of redness. He must be a strong drinker. "He has never been to Erdal himself, but he knows so much about the empire's commerce. And not just Erdal's. He knows about

many other countries, too.”

“Oh, my stories are just what I heard from merchants,” Jude said with a flustered smile, then he lifted the large bottle and poured some alcohol into Clovis’s glass.

While not keeping up with Robert’s pace, her adviser was finally enjoying his drink after getting Alicia’s approval.

“I just walk about town and pop into any of the pubs, and there will always be familiar faces there. The merchants are great talkers and nice people, and I learn a lot from them,” Jude continued.

“You must really like merchants. You seem happy when you talk about them,” Alicia observed.

“Liking is one thing, but I can be myself when I’m with them. And this is only possible here in Held. That’s how we members of House Nicol were raised.”

Alicia turned her gaze to the dark sea outside. For a princess who had known nothing but the castle until recently, it felt so strange that the sea connected her kingdom to foreign lands she’d never seen before.

Perhaps it was the openness of Held, connected via the sea to the rest of the world, that cultivated people like Jude, whose perspective was so different from the other nobles who took up residence in the capital.

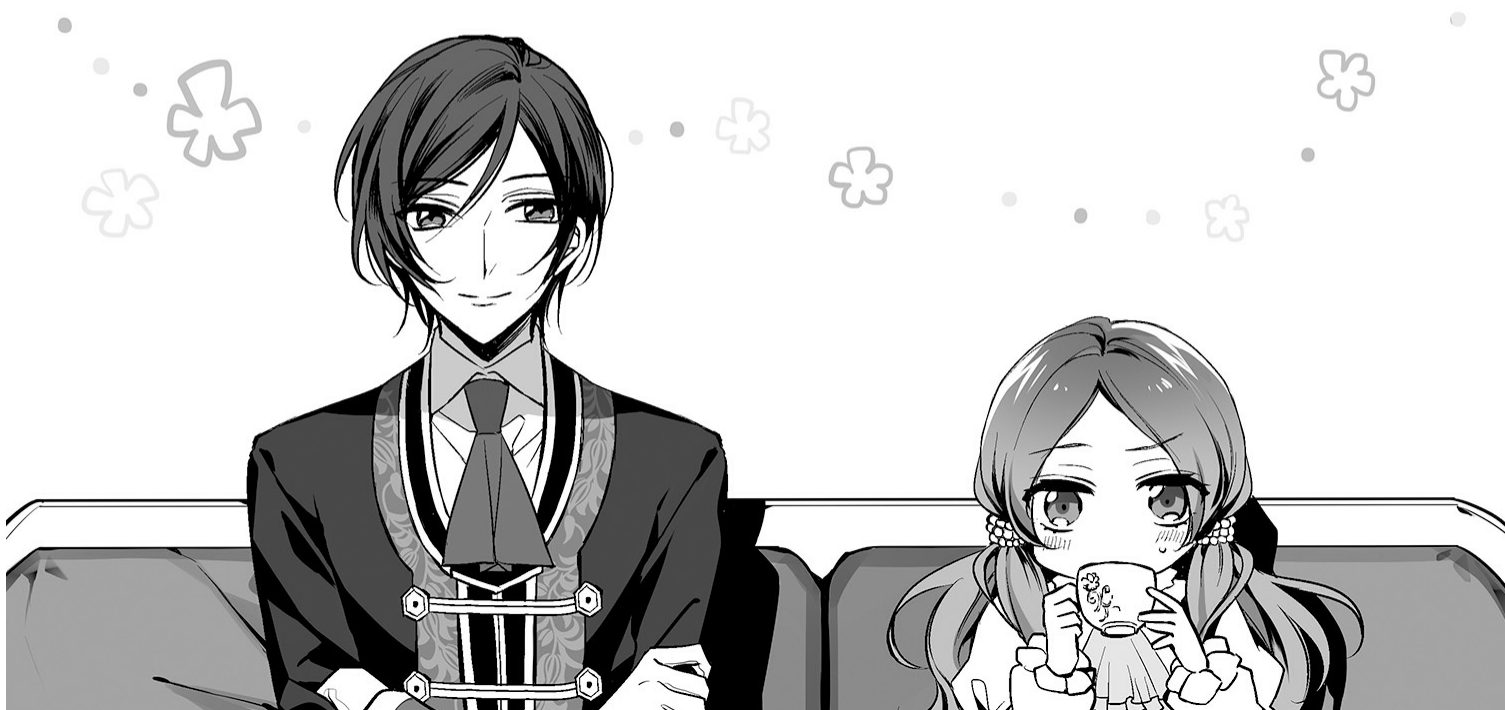
“Have you ever wished to be born into a different family, say one of the merchants?”

The young lord’s face bloomed with joy at Clovis’s sudden question.

“Yes! Oh, how fun would that be! In fact, I’d be willing to sell my noble title to someone right now!” With a cheerful laugh, the young lord lifted his glass and took a swig, but the expression on his face when he returned the glass to the table seemed somewhat lonely. “Maybe if I were born in another country, I could be a noble without dealing with such narrow-mindedness. Somewhere where status and connections don’t matter, and everyone lives free and unconstrained...”

It was probably disrespectful to speak such words before the kingdom’s

princess, but Alicia couldn't blame him.



The walls that separated social classes in Heilland were unscalable. That's why the townsfolk were so surprised to see Alicia during her inspection and, though justified, why Riddhe flew into a rage when confronted by commoners.

As much as she wished to change things, Alicia didn't have the power to do so yet.

As she sat resigned, Robert spoke up in a clear voice. "Just a minute, my lord. Isn't it still too early to despair?" Swirling the ice in his glass, the knight with beautiful silver hair winked. "Visiting other countries is nice, but I think it'll be much more exciting to keep an eye on our own kingdom going forward. After all, our beloved Princess Alicia will change Heilland in so many fun ways."

"Huh?" Alicia stared at Robert in shock. She hadn't told the knight about her plan to become Heilland's next ruler. Were rumors already spreading among the people?

However, his next words brought relief.

"Beneath that sweet face lies more courage than I've seen in some men. She stopped Lord Stubborn over there from running away and appointed him as her adviser, went on an incognito trip to the castle town, and even reprimanded a misbehaving noble twerp while there."

"Who are you calling Lord Stubborn?" Clovis complained, his shapely brows furrowed in a frown.

But Jude's interest had been piqued. He leaned towards Alicia, his eyes sparkling. "Sounds like an interesting story. Would you mind sharing?"

"One tale from our inspection tour the other day, coming up! Oh, but we have to keep the twerp's identity a secret. He got into such a shameful mess that I would feel sorry for him if I exposed his real name." With that introduction, Robert began his story, telling it as eloquently as a bard.

Of course, they kept Riddhe's identity a secret, in line with Alicia's promise to settle the matter quietly.

Alicia blushed furiously as Robert recounted the events of the inspection tour like it was a heroic tale, all while leaving out information that was too specific.

Jude listened attentively, frequently glancing at the princess with admiration.

And that was how their peaceful mini-banquet ended that evening.



THE next morning, Alicia took her breakfast in her room, got dressed, and headed to the living room, where Jude and Clovis were waiting.

Their second discussion started with looking at several concrete strategies to establish a wide-area trading company in Heiland. Alicia and Clovis wanted to hear the opinions of the author of the proposal, and the young lord gladly obliged.

The company's main mission would be to act as a middleman, but how was that going to work in reality? For the company to operate, what sort of cooperation would be required from the noble lords? How should they connect with the other wide-area trading companies in neighboring countries?

And so, Clovis and Jude went back and forth as they discussed these topics. Lacking the relevant knowledge, the princess watched, trusting her adviser to manage things with skill.

The discussion solidified Alicia's belief that Lord Rozen should be the leader of the plan.

His greatest strength was his ability to see things from the perspective of both a nobleman and a merchant. The proposed wide-area trading company would cooperate with the lords of each territory to help local businesses sell their goods, so someone like Jude would be a valuable asset indeed.

However, judging from his refusal yesterday, he was still determined not to take the role. Even if he was glad to offer them advice, he would surely run away as soon as they asked him to share his ideas with the other nobles.

I have to convince him somehow. What can I use to my advantage?

As much as Jude disliked interacting with nobility, he seemed fine with Alicia and her entourage. In fact, it felt as if he was looking forward to mingling with her retainers, considering he invited them to stay and chat after dinner last night.

Maybe what he disliked was not the nobles themselves but the society so strictly divided by social status, and the unspoken rule to only interact with those of the same standing as himself.

Alicia didn't want to force anything on Jude, even if the future of the kingdom was at stake. That said, they needed someone flexible like him to realize their plan. She racked her brain as she sat beside her adviser, who was busy reconciling ideas in order to help her draft the motion.

Soon, the second discussion came to an end. Jude gazed joyfully at the princess. He was probably excited to see his proposal take shape.

"My, what a surprise. Clo is really amazing. Truly an adviser worthy of serving you, Princess Alicia. My vague ideas became concrete plans so quickly with his help."

Her handsome adviser smiled respectfully, letting the nickname slide. Alicia looked between the two, then smiled as well.

"We also have to thank you for your clear perspective regarding the merchants, Lord Rozen. I'm so glad I left the castle to come meet you. Clovis is excellent, but your opinions about the merchants and companies are indispensable."

"I'm glad. People always think me strange for hanging out with the merchant class. If only they knew I'd be of help to the princess one day." The young lord laughed. "Anyway, the advisory office will be on board thanks to Clo, but we still have to face several obstacles, with the district council being the first and the Privy Council as the last. Do you think they will come to understand the importance of our company?"

"We'll just have to be patient and work to convince them. They may not agree right away, but I'm sure we'll find like-minded people."

Jude's green eyes blinked at Alicia's bold statement. "You are very confident, but you must be aware of how stubborn some of the Privy Council members are."

"Then how about this?" It was Robert who spoke, standing guard at the door with his arms crossed and a teasing smile on his face. "Let's make maximum use

of our status. We'll use His Majesty's influence to establish the new company first. Even the Privy Council can't overturn the king's will. It's the quickest way to do it."

"I oppose that idea." Clovis's response was immediate, his expression immovable. "A self-righteous approach breeds resentment. King James himself would not approve. He would want us to convince the nobles until they wholeheartedly agree with us."

Clovis's violet gaze was locked on Alicia's as he emphasized his words. The princess nodded quietly in response.

"I prefer not to do that as well. It may take a long time, but I want to do it the right way," she said.

"But why?!" Jude yelled, shocked, before he remembered who he was speaking to. "Sorry. No offense, but frankly, your method is too honest and foolish."

"You're right. It's not the smartest move," Alicia said with a wry smile as she looked at the young lord. "But I don't have the power to do more."

Jude's bright green eyes widened at Alicia's words, but Clovis gave her a gentle smile.

Alicia was aware that she was neither brilliant nor especially talented. She had many endearing virtues that helped charm the people around her, but these were not enough to get her through affairs of state. And because she was aware of all this, she didn't wish to use her royal status as a shield to oppress others.

"If a monarch and the common people are united by trust, and everyone puts in effort to improve the country in their own way, the result is a much greater strength than if the king holds all the power by himself."

Repeating the words Clovis had taught her, the princess looked at Jude with wise eyes.

"Perhaps the wisdom of the councils will prove that a wide-area trading company is not the best idea after all. And I will be content with that, because we will have reached that decision through everyone's efforts."

“...You are really a strange princess,” Jude muttered.

Alicia tilted her head to one side. “Really? I don’t think so.”

“Yes. It’s the same with the story about your inspection tour that Robert told last night. Your actions are different from what a royal would do... It’s so intriguing.” With that, Jude clapped his hands together, as if switching up the mood in the room. Then he stood and looked at everyone gathered with a relaxed smile. “Anyway, let us have lunch. Good food will cultivate good ideas. The day is still long!”



IT happened after everyone had lunch together.

“Hey, Clo!”

They were taking a short break before resuming discussions.

On a whim, Clovis visited the reception room again to look over the town of Held and was walking down the corridor when he heard a voice call out from one of the rooms.

The source of the voice was Jude, beckoning him through an open door.

“Glad I caught you! Could you give me a hand? Just for a short while!”

Clovis entered the room. It was one of several in the mansion that held House Nicol’s varied collections. An entire wall was decorated with porcelain pieces, so the family had nicknamed it the Oriental Room, and it was known to be Jude’s personal favorite.

Jude gestured toward a chair and requested that Clovis hold it still so it wouldn’t topple while he climbed on top. The young lord clambered onto the chair, then adjusted the position of a decorative plate displayed on a high shelf.

“Thanks. The servant probably bumped into it when they were cleaning. Once I noticed it was askew, I just couldn’t ignore it.”

Jude looked up at the wall with a cheerful smile, satisfied. Clovis stood by the lord and gazed upon the amazing collection of masterpieces as well.

“You have quite the collection of porcelain here.”

“Most of it wasn’t bought by me. It’s a collection that’s been growing steadily with each generation of my family, and it just piled up, I guess.” Jude picked up a decorative plate and caressed it lovingly. “To tell the truth, we are working on porcelain research.”

“Is that so?” Clovis’s eyes widened as he looked at the handsome young lord next to him.

Porcelain imported from across the seas, with its beautiful smooth white surfaces and vivid paintings, was popular with many noblemen who collected it. However, the techniques to create them remained a secret, and the foreigners remained the only ones who could craft such perfect pieces.

For that reason, enthusiastic collectors from various countries, not just Heiland and Erdal, were conducting their own research to uncover a technique to create perfect porcelain. However, it was the first time Clovis had heard of the marquise of Rozen doing that as well.

“In one of the more rural areas, though. I heard from a merchant familiar with the Orient that clay is the most important element. I love porcelain myself, but of course, if we succeed in this venture, it will bring huge profits to the kingdom.”

“True, once orders from nobles in the various countries start pouring in.”

“When that happens, I’ll definitely require the help of a wide-area trading company. It’ll sell amazingly well, and we’ll all be so busy.”

After gently wiping its surface with his sleeve, Jude carefully returned the decorative plate to its wall fixture. To Clovis, this room seemed to hold all the history of the Nicol family.

A clan from the port town who trained their eyes to discern the most excellent luxury goods and pick out the best products. They knew exactly how to weed out useless or complicated goods, leaving only those of value.

“I’ll be taking my leave then,” Clovis said with a slight bow.

“You are related to Graham, right?”

Clovis stopped in his tracks and stiffened. Turning around, he was shocked to

see Jude smiling happily, his arms spread wide.

“Don’t worry, I won’t scorn you for it. But judging from your reaction, I’m guessing that he was a close relative?”

“Zach Graham is my grandfather,” Clovis answered without emotion.

Because of his appearance, he was used to such questions from people. However, this was different. He needed Jude as an ally.

He must not become a hindrance to Alicia’s path forward. He had sworn to do everything he could to clear the way for her, but if that wasn’t possible, then Clovis could never forgive himself.

So, how would the marquis of Rozen take this?

Full of loyalty to the princess and his own personal dignity, Clovis remained wary. In contrast, Jude’s voice rose in shock.

“You’re his grandson?! No wonder you have the same hair and eyes!”

“When did you realize it?”

“Since the moment you stepped down from the carriage. House Graham’s signature black hair is rare indeed. After the scandal, House Graham disappeared from the public eye, so I didn’t think there were any close relatives still around.”

Of course, anyone who knew about House Graham knew of Zach Graham’s past deeds. Nonetheless, Jude’s eyes held no contempt, only innocent interest.

Clovis must have looked doubtful, as Jude let out a wry smile.

“I’m just like you, Clo. We’re both disliked by others and ostracized by the nobility. So why do you still serve Princess Alicia?”

“Why?”

“I understand that she is not your average princess, but one person’s ideals cannot change a whole kingdom. You are smart, so you should know that.”

Clovis lowered his beautiful, clear violet eyes as Jude continued.

“Even so, I can see that you are especially loyal to her. Why is that?”

Why was he serving Princess Alicia?

Unwittingly, Clovis's gaze moved to his right hand. He still remembered how her small hand felt as it held onto him. Needless to say, that was the moment he decided to serve Alicia. But was that really all there was to it? After a moment, Clovis slowly shook his head.

"Her Highness was the one who saved me. At first, I became her adviser because I wanted to repay her kindness."

But it was no longer as simple as that.

The more time he spent with Alicia and the more he learned of her secrets and wishes, Clovis's loyalty to her only grew deeper.

"She's serious about doing whatever she can for the kingdom and its citizens, despite knowing how difficult and full of obstacles it will be."

Despite lacking in knowledge and power.

Even so, the sight of her fighting hard to avoid a horrific future was dazzling and dangerous to Clovis. She was such a good-natured girl who could so easily slip up at any point that he wished to protect her.

"If she chooses a dangerous path, then I wish to light the way for her. If the goal she is aiming for is on top of a steep cliff, then I will become the fence that protects her."

"You're blinded by devotion, Clo, just like a knight in a fairytale. Is she really worth all your determination?"

Alicia's worth?

Clovis almost burst out into laughter. He should be the one asking if he was worthy enough to serve Alicia.

"I truly believe that she is Heiland's future."

"...I see."

Nodding vigorously, Jude's lips lifted in a challenging smile. He looked like a merchant ready to use his bargaining chip in an important business deal.

"Will the princess be able to change our kingdom? Tell me what you really

think, Clo.”

“You know my answer.” Clovis locked gazes with the man before him and smiled. “She will change this kingdom, making it a place where everyone can contribute their strength and wisdom while supporting each other... I am sure that you already know that yourself.”

“Hehe, that was entertaining!” Finally, the young lord gave up. Raising his hands in surrender, he laughed cheerfully with a shrug. “All right, you got me. You’ve managed to pique my interest. I haven’t felt this excited since that time I found the perfect clay to make porcelain.”

Jude clapped Clovis on the shoulder.

“All right, I’ll take charge of establishing your trading company. Working for that princess of yours sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Are you serious?!”

“But I have two conditions.” Raising two fingers, a teasing smile appeared on Jude’s face. He watched for Clovis’s reaction and paced slowly across the room. “First, I hate wasting time, so I only want the most efficient people working with me. Will I be given the chance to select my own core team?”

“Sure, though we will want to look through your selection as well.” Slipping into his role as adviser to the princess, Clovis nodded. After all the discussions they’d had together, he trusted Jude not to choose anyone undesirable.

Satisfied with Clovis’s answer, Jude lowered one finger. “Second, I do not intend to change my stance. As the leader of this, I will need to meet with the nobles of the Privy Council, but don’t expect things to go well in those situations.”

“It’s not an issue; we understand that.”

The black-haired adviser’s expression hardened. Dealing with the Privy Council was part of every adviser’s job, but it was going to be doubly tough now that he needed to justify the actions of the willful Lord Rozen.

Regardless, tasking Jude to lead this mission had many advantages. The lord was close to the merchants and highly trusted in his territory, and with him at

the center of the project, the establishment of the trading company would proceed much more swiftly.

Your Highness, you are really something...

Despite his calm expression, Clovis's heart burned with passion.

Alicia was that amazing. Even though she seemed powerless on the surface, she possessed a mysterious charm that made others want to work for and support her.

It was her greatest weapon and the key they needed to save the kingdom.

With his hand on his chest, Clovis bowed. "I am deeply grateful for your decision to support Her Highness."

"Stop being so formal. Be happy! Have fun! That's what's most important." Jude laughed jovially as he held out a hand.

After a moment's hesitation, Clovis's amethyst eyes narrowed with amusement as he shook the lord's hand. "I look forward to working with you, Jude."

"Now we're talking." He gave Clovis's hand a squeeze and then spun around the Oriental Room, clearly excited. "Now that that's decided, we need to put together a draft as soon as we can and submit it to the district council! Hehe, I've never cared since they've always rejected my proposals, but I'm gonna pull out all the stops this time!"

8. Epilogue (A New Beginning)

AS expected, Alicia was stunned by Jude's sudden change of mind to fully cooperate with them. Regardless, she was overjoyed as she thanked the marquis.

Though neither of them spoke of it, it was clear that something had happened between Clovis and Jude that led to the latter's change of heart.

"Remind me not to be surprised at anything Lord Clovis does anymore," Annie grumbled in the carriage on the way back to the capital. "Not even when everyone finally learns that he's a wizard, yes, I will not be surprised."

In any case, with Jude Nicol as the newest addition, Alicia's entourage put together a draft motion after a series of in-depth discussions before they headed back towards Egdiel.



A few months passed, and the seasons changed.

In that time, the draft proposal for the establishment of the Mercurius Company, compiled by Clovis based on Jude Nicol's idea, received the approval of the district council and made its way to the advisory office and, eventually, the king.

There was a good reason why the process took such a long time.

Usually, drafts from the various ministries would be considered by the advisory office and would be submitted to the king as formal proposals only after numerous discussions with the relevant departments. There, the king would make the final decision. Should the king deem the matter important enough, he would summon the Privy Council to make the decision.

However, this proposal was irregular since it was picked up by the advisory office first before submission to the district council.

"We have to be careful with the district council. We are submitting a proposal

they already rejected once, so they may take this as a loss of face.”

Following his own counsel, Clovis remained prudent in his discussions with district commissioner Dreyfus. Despite that, it still took a great amount of effort to convince the council.

To Commissioner Dreyfus’s credit, he was truly a compassionate and fair official.

A man of action, he preferred to get the ball rolling once he made a decision. Even in the Privy Council, where everyone had secrets, he exuded a mysterious sense of security and was well-liked and trusted by the other council members.

But because his thinking was old-fashioned, his personality clashed in the worst way with Jude’s. In Dreyfus’s eyes, a noble who refused to build relationships with the other nobles, shut himself away in his own territory, and did nothing should not be tolerated.

However, that wasn’t why he rejected the marquis of Rozen’s proposal. Just like Alicia and Clovis, he read through the document and came to the same conclusion as they did, but he decided not to submit it to the advisory office.

Unfortunately, Jude’s proposal was the unintelligible ramblings of a disagreeable man in Dreyfus’s mind.

So when the advisory office passed the draft proposal for the establishment of Mercurius Company to the district council, and Dreyfus learned that it was based on Jude Nicol’s idea, he knocked over the ink pot on his desk in shock before throwing the document out of his office. Then he protested furiously, declaring that the advisory office was stepping out of line.

However, with Clovis’s perseverance and persuasion, Dreyfus gradually softened his stance as he learned how the draft proposal was more detailed and well-researched than Jude’s initial one.

At the right moment, Alicia penned a personal letter with a sincere appeal for his cooperation for the future of their kingdom, and the compassionate Dreyfus caved.

Thus, the first proposal in the name of Princess Alicia was finally delivered to King James.

After looking through it, the king issued an order to the kingdom's most important nobles.

In other words, he summoned the Privy Council.



“WE'RE finally here.”

The morning sun streamed in through the large windows. Illuminated by the white light, Alicia's profile was tinged with nervousness as she gazed outside.

Her dress was a vivid blue, her symbolic color to represent her strong will. Standing beside her, her black-haired adviser turned his beautiful amethyst eyes toward his mistress.

“You're trembling.”

“Just a little,” Alicia confessed, looking up at Clovis with a dignified smile. “But you're with me. I have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Your Highness...” Slightly astonished, the corners of Clovis's lips lifted in a smile as he placed a hand upon his chest and bowed. “I will protect you with my life.”

“I told you, your promises are too big,” Alicia huffed.

Whether Clovis had meant to or not, his words helped Alicia relax. Hoping to loosen up her body, Alicia swept the hem of her dress to the side and stepped forward.

“Let's go, Clovis. The battlefield lies ahead.”

“At your service.”

The trill of birds echoed across the sunny sky, reaching the ears of the various heads of the noble houses gathered in the great hall as they awaited the arrival of the royals.

And so, the curtains closed on a chapter in the history of Heiland.

Side Story: Clo and Clo

“SO cute!!”

A young girl’s voice rang out across the churchyard. Clovis, who was helping the caretaker clean up the tea accessories, stopped and turned around.

The girl who had cried out was none other than his mistress, Alicia.

They were on an incognito inspection tour, so her signature sky-blue hair was hidden by a cape with a large hood. At a glance, nobody would be able to tell that the small girl was Princess Alicia, the only daughter of the current king.

Neither Edmund, the church caretaker, nor the other children had discovered her true identity yet. The sight of Alicia surrounded by the other kids, crouched together, made the corners of Clovis’s lips lift in a smile.

“What have you found, Alice?”

“Clo— Brother!!”

Taking his leave of the caretaker, Clovis headed to the center of the group of children as Alicia turned around, a smile blooming on her face.

In order to conceal her identity, Clovis and Alicia were acting as siblings.

He felt a little strange having to treat his beloved mistress as a younger sister. However, now that they were out and about town, Alicia had placed her trust in him, relying on him like he was really her brother. Clovis was surprised to find himself enjoying this dynamic.

Even now, when she looked at him with a happy, innocent smile, it made him want to forget his status and position and spoil her rotten.

To be honest, that was strange for Clovis. While he didn’t mind looking after children, he had never become particularly attached to any, nor did a child ever stir up his protective nature the way Alicia did.

He gave a wry smile, knowing that he was no different from the two maids

they'd left behind in the castle, who loved Alicia dearly.

"You sound happy... What have you found?"

"Look, brother. This little one is so cute."

Alicia held up a fluffy animal in her arms for Clovis to see.

It was a tiny kitten.

The animal seemed used to being held, for it showed no fear at being in the arms of a stranger like Alicia and even purred contentedly as it nuzzled against her chest.

Clovis watched with admiration as Edmund, one of the kids around Alicia, rubbed his nose with pride.

"We've all been taking care of him since he wandered into the church... Hey, Clo, do you know what his name is?"

"Huh?"

The tone of Edmund's voice gave Clovis a bad feeling.

He looked at the kitten. It yawned without a care in the world. It seemed like an ordinary black cat, with no special defining features. If he had to pick something of note, he'd have to say it was its large, clear eyes, which were a rare violet color...

Hm? Uneasy, Clovis tilted his head to one side. Black fur, and violet eyes?

"...Is it the same as my brother's?" Alicia ventured.

"Bingo!" Edmund snapped his fingers with a grin. "His name is Clo!"

"Wow! Is your name Clo? It suits you perfectly!" Alicia cooed at the kitten.

Clo, the kitten, meowed happily.

Edmund looked proud of his witty naming sense, though Clovis just let out a sigh.

"And I'm guessing you're the one who named him?"

"Of course. It's a good name, huh?"

"A good name...?"

It was true. The kitten's coloring was indeed the same as Clovis's own.

A complex feeling suddenly overcame him, and Clovis's eyes moistened as he looked at the kitten. It didn't help that Alicia, taken by the animal, was still fawning over it.

"Little Clo~. It's all right. You're a good kitten."

"...Alice."

"You're a sweet little baby, Clo... What is it, brother?"

"Could you please stop calling him that? And I would appreciate it if you would put the kitten down."

"But why?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Oh?"

A mischievous smile appeared on Alicia's face as she hugged the kitten in her arms. She looked as sweet as ever, but was he the only one who saw a devil's tail suddenly appear behind her?

She rubbed her cheek against the kitten. "Oh, I'll never let this little one go."

"H-Hey!"

"He's so cute, I must dote on him properly. Isn't that right, little Clo?"

Clovis reached for Alicia, but she slipped away, looking up at him with her sky-blue eyes. It might be true that she loved the cat, but it was clear that she was greatly amused by Clovis's reaction.

"Clo wants to be hugged, right? Clo loves me too, right?"

Must she do this...?

The kitten meowed in response to Alicia's questions. Clovis crossed his arms.

Alicia's love of mischief was inherited from her father, the king. Her innocent personality was one of the reasons why everyone, including Clovis, adored her.

Usually, he would just give a bitter smile and accept his fate.

But today was different. He wanted revenge on her for her little prank.

Perhaps it was because they were supposed to be siblings today. And while it might be childish, he wanted to let the girl know that she hadn't won.

Just then, an idea popped into his mind.

"...That's right. A feeling such as love must be shown in the right manner."

"So you agree, brother?"

"Of course.... That's why I want to learn from you, Alice."

"Huh? W-Wait? A-Ah?! Brother?!"

As quick as a flash, Clovis grabbed hold of Alicia and sat down on the grass. He sat her on his lap and locked his arms around her and the kitten, preventing her escape.

"Hey! What's this? Brother, let me down..."

"No, Alice. You'll scare the kitten if you struggle like that."

"I know, but that's not the point!"

"...Didn't you say it yourself?" he whispered in her ear so the other children couldn't hear, and Alicia turned scarlet as she whipped her head around. Her expression of protest made Clovis smile as he looked teasingly at her. "When something is cute, I must dote on it properly. I think you're very cute, so I'm following your advice."

"...! D-Do whatever you want."

"As you command."

Clovis grinned, but Alicia flinched and turned her back toward him. He thought he must have offended her, but it became clear that she was just hiding her embarrassment. That made him happy.

But she was his mistress, and he was her retainer. This was the only chance he'd get to tease her this way.

Clovis patted Alicia's small head.

"I'm sorry, I went too far. I promise I'll stop, so would you face me?"

"...All right. We can stay a little longer like this."

It was an unexpected answer.

“I don’t dislike it,” she hurried to add with a pout, as if feeling caught.

Clovis’s heart filled with warmth.

Only Alicia. His lovely princess was the only one he wanted to dote on, give everything to, and protect.

Clovis tightened his hold on his “little sister,” a dazzling smile on his face.

“So, Alice, what would you like to do? Would you like to rest on my lap like this? Shall I read you a book?”

Alicia turned red and wriggled. “What? Hey! Don’t take advantage of the situation like that!!”

“...You guys are too close,” Edmund butted in, his face twisted in disgust.

“Meow~”

The black kitten called out softly, as if agreeing with Edmund.

Side Story: Our Young Master is Just a Little Troublesome

THE inspection squad from Erdal had come home.

That day, many nobles gathered at Egdiel Castle to celebrate the return of the brilliant young men chosen to fulfill the long-cherished wish of the previous king. However, the nobles weren't the only people present. The families and servants of each squad member were also present, with carriages ready and waiting impatiently for their masters.

One of those servants, Albert, a servant of House Sutherland, was also waiting outside the castle.

There were designated waiting rooms for the servants, though most of them were out and about now, mostly on the carriages for their masters. The inspection squad had passed off all their bags and items upon entering the castle, and everything had to be loaded up to be ferried back home.

Albert diligently loaded up the bags onto the carriage with the other servants of House Sutherland, but even that task was completed quickly.

When he loaded the last item, Albert looked up at the stone walls of Egdiel Castle. The grand recognition ceremony for the inspection squad must be in full swing by now. Albert could almost see the proud face of his young master in his mind's eye...

Just then, the wooden door behind him slammed open.

"Al!! Are you here?!"

He knew the voice, but he wasn't expecting to hear it yet. Albert turned around doubtfully. When he caught sight of the youth standing imposingly in the doorway, his eyes widened.

"Master Riddhe?!"

They hadn't seen each other for two years, but there was no mistaking it. It

was Riddhe, the heir of House Sutherland.

But why was he here? According to the briefing from the castle staff, there was to be a ball after the ceremony. He had been told when the ball was expected to end and when to bring his carriage around to the main door to pick up his master.

But here Riddhe was, dressed in ceremonial attire, no less, coming out of a back door meant for the servants. Albert was bewildered.

Catching sight of him, Riddhe let out a derisive snort as he descended the stairs and made a beeline for his servant, his face twisted with displeasure.

“Didn’t you hear me calling you?! Hurry and bring the carriage around. I’m leaving!”

“Yes. Right away?! Oh, but what about the ball?”

“Argh, enough! I said I’m leaving! Bring the carriage here right now!”

Albert was perplexed. Riddhe looked like he was about to stamp his feet in a tantrum. House Sutherland might be powerful, but was it really the best idea for his master to sneak out and leave a royal court ball so prematurely?

He glanced at the other servants, wondering what to do, but everyone kept their eyes lowered, as if begging Albert, Riddhe’s favorite servant, to handle the situation.

After a moment, Albert’s shoulders drooped in defeat.

Riddhe would never sully the good name of House Sutherland. No matter how upset he got, he knew when to respect decorum, and he wouldn’t leave unless he knew he was allowed to.

That must be the case. Yes, he would trust his master.

“Right away. Please board the carriage, my lord.”

“Took you long enough. Have all my things been loaded?”

“Of course. We had just finished doing so when you arrived.”

“Good. I’m tired and will be sleeping, so don’t wake me.”

Despite his words, Riddhe looked too worked up to even think about taking a

nap. But Riddhe never flew into a rage without reason. Albert opened the carriage door with a smile and watched him climb in.

Climbing into the driver's seat and gathering the reins, Albert sighed.

What had upset Riddhe so badly?

Oh, right, he'd overheard his master mutter the words "Damn you, Cromwell" as he got into the carriage. Perhaps he had a falling out with one of the inspection squad members.

Albert shook his head sadly.

Riddhe could be like that sometimes.

The heir to House Sutherland was perfect and so intelligent, but also ridiculously competitive. To make matters worse, he'd been spoiled by everyone since he was a child (not that Albert would ever say that to him), so he had become arrogant as well. Thus, whenever he identified someone as his rival, he would never stop until he had proven himself to be better in every way.

Riddhe was selfish, arrogant, overwhelmingly proud, and, for better or for worse, exceedingly self-confident. For these reasons, some servants found it hard to serve him.

However, Albert didn't mind. While he could be troublesome and frustrating at times, he did not dislike Riddhe. And that was because Riddhe used to have a cute side as well...



AS a child, Riddhe was even more annoying...

How so? As the duke's heir, it was Riddhe's favorite pastime to compete and compare himself against Albert, a mere commoner's son.

Born as the son of a butler working for House Sutherland, Albert grew up in his master's mansion with his mother, as their entire family worked as servants for the nobles. Due to this and the fact that both boys were close in age, the young Riddhe took an immediate liking to Albert.

Thinking back on it now, it was a miracle that Riddhe didn't mind having

someone of much lower social standing as a playmate. That said, the young master was more obedient back then. He probably enjoyed having someone like Albert follow him around.

Albert's childhood would have been perfect if that were all, but unfortunately, that was not the case. Riddhe insisted on showing off his knowledge and skills to Albert, be it history, literature, horsemanship, or swordsmanship.

"Look, Al! Can you do this?"

No way could Albert, a butler's son, compete with Riddhe. To his credit, Albert had his own lessons, learning etiquette and any knowledge needed for him to serve the Sutherlands. However, as the future duke, Riddhe had the best tutors, and the difference between them soon became stark.

That was why Albert always shook his head obediently.

"You are amazing, young master. I can't do that."

"Aha! Of course, of course. That's because I'm Lord Sutherland's son!"

Satisfied with Albert's answer, Riddhe always responded with his chest puffed out with pride.

They went through this same conversation every day, and Albert was surprised that Riddhe never got tired of it. It was never much fun for Albert himself.

He knew that he could never win against the duke's son, but after being labeled a "loser" countless times, he couldn't help but feel annoyed.

That was why he used to dislike Riddhe.

However, his impression of Riddhe changed about half a year after he started living in the mansion.



THAT day, Albert had slipped out of the mansion to play along a nearby river.

Aside from Riddhe, there were no other children close to his age in the mansion, and since Riddhe did nothing but brag all the time, Albert would slip

out in secret sometimes to play with the children in town. Since they were all commoners, he got along much better with them.

There were some kids who disliked Albert because he lived in the duke's mansion and received a sensible education despite being a commoner. He learned this when his games with the children near the river were interrupted by a trio of bullies.

Despite being relatively well-dressed, they were bigger and well-known for being bullies. The kids with Albert trembled with fear when they approached.

Albert stood in front of his friends, shielding them away as he glared at the trio.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"You. You're just a merchant's boy, but go around pretending to be a noble's son," one of them sneered.

"Yeah, yeah! Merchant~ Merchant~ Merchant's pauper son~," another chanted.

"My dad's a merchant too. We're richer than the other merchants. We're so much better than you!" the third added.

"What? Is that all you have to say?"

The trio stopped and looked at each other blankly. Apparently, they assumed that Albert would feel embarrassed and angry. When their insults fell flat, their faces turned bright red.

"Don't act all cocky!"

"You're nothing but a lackey of the duke's son!"

"Yeah, lackey! Wanna scream for Master Riddhe to help you~?"

"I'm not the young master's lackey!!"

The trio were overjoyed at having discovered Albert's trigger point and chanted "Lackey, lackey" in loud voices.

Blood boiling, Albert rushed at them, but there was no way a slender boy like him could take on the three bigger boys. He was overwhelmed. Punch after

punch struck him until the trio got bored and left, leaving him battered on the ground.

He struggled to get up and dragged himself back to the mansion, where he unfortunately ran into Riddhe. The noble boy was about to brag when he caught sight of Albert's injuries. His eyes narrowed.

"What happened, Al?! How did you get hurt? Who did this?"

"...It's nothing. These injuries are nothing big."

"Nonsense! I know, did you sneak into town again? Answer me! Who were the brats who did this to you? I'll punish them!"

"I said I'm all right! This isn't any of your business!"

Belatedly, he realized that he'd shouted at Riddhe. It was too late to take it back, and Riddhe's face turned red.

"Wh-Wh-What?!! I was just worried about you!!"

"I'm sorry, young master. I—"

"Enough. I don't care anymore. Do whatever you want!"

Turning on his heel, Riddhe dashed away before Albert could stop him, but not before he saw large tears gather in his master's eyes.

I made him cry.

Riddhe was always boasting and causing trouble, but he was genuinely worried about Albert. And Albert had hurt him. His heart ached at the thought.

But he didn't want Riddhe to be his protector. It was just that his inferiority complex had gotten the better of him when the trio were teasing him for being a lackey.

If he had told Riddhe about the bullies, the young noble would have found a way to punish them. That would only confirm the fact that Albert was Riddhe's lackey, and Albert's pride would never let that happen.

This is my problem, and I'll settle it myself.

Making that silent promise, Albert apologized to Riddhe in his heart as he dragged his aching body forward.



HIS chance for revenge came soon enough.

Albert guessed that if he visited the same river again, the bullies would show up sooner or later, and his prediction came true. He had gathered his friends by the riverbank when the grinning trio pushed their way through the grass.

“Hey, lackey. You’re here again?”

“You gonna be okay without your master?”

“You must be so scared and trembling without your master.”

“Yeah, lackey, lackey!”

As the boys started their teasing, Albert stood up and folded his arms.

“You’re finally here, bullies. I’m here to punish you today.”

“Ooh, how?”

“A lazy noble wannabe like you?”

“I know. You’re gonna cry for your master. Save me~ Maaaster~!”

Albert just smiled at the trio’s antics. “No. The Victim Alliance will punish you!”

“Let’s go!!”

“Yeah!!”

At his command, children emerged from the tall grass. With a large group of ten, they shocked the trio of bullies.

“Y-You cowards!” one of them yelled.

“There’s too many of you! That’s unfair!” another shouted.

“Shut up! The three of you came at me alone the last time. If you wanna blame someone, blame yourself for bullying us in the first place!”

With that, Albert’s Victim Alliance pounced on the trio as one.



“W-WE’LL remember this!”

Cheers erupted as the trio ran away with tears in their eyes. After a round of celebration, the children fell onto their backs on the grass by the riverbank.

Even with ten kids against them, the trio had fought well. After all, the Victim Alliance was made up of quiet kids who didn't like to fight. However, they'd won this time.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment, Albert stared up at the sky and let out a heavy sigh. Just then, dry twigs cracked in the forest.

"Wh-Who's there?"

"Maybe they've come back...?"

"...I don't think so."

After soothing the frightened children, Albert dashed alone into the forest. There, he spotted a familiar carriage stopped on a narrow path just up ahead and a small boy climbing into it.

"Young master!!"

The boy froze at the sound of Albert's voice. After a moment, Riddhe turned around, an unhappy frown on his face.

"Oh, it's just Albert. What a surprise seeing you here."

"What? How could it be a surprise?! Did you try to follow me today?"

"No! ...I mean, yeah. But you were being so secretive. I was in the mood to visit town, so we just headed in the same direction. That's all."

However, Riddhe's eyes were glistening. He must have been worried when he discovered that Albert had snuck out of the mansion and followed him. While that was a surprise in itself, there was something Albert didn't understand.

"Why didn't you intervene just now?"

Knowing Riddhe's personality, the teasing and subsequent fight would have greatly upset him. However, he had remained silent, watching the scene from afar.

Riddhe averted his eyes in shame. "You would have been angry if I did."

"...Huh?"

“I’m a man, too! I understood what you needed to do... Besides, I knew you would win anyway,” Riddhe finally muttered.

A strange happiness filled Albert, and he wanted to cheer out loud. Riddhe had been so mad, but he’d stayed out of the fight and worried over him out of respect for Albert’s pride.

That’s my master...

“But it won’t happen again! I know those guys now, and if you come back hurt again, I’ll tell Father, and he’ll crush those families!”

Albert just burst into laughter at Riddhe’s angry threat. “You can’t do that, young master. You are to become the next duke, so you have to be nice to the townsfolk. They’ll dislike you if they hear you say such things.”

“Who cares! You’re much more important than those nameless hooligans!”

“I’m happy to hear that, but you still can’t do it.”

“Oh, whatever! Now you’re just making me mad! They’d better not come back!”

Riddhe’s angry voice echoed through the forest, soon joined by Albert’s laughter.

That day, Albert’s feelings toward Riddhe changed.



MASTER *Riddhe was so pure, foolish, and cute back then...* Albert thought as he stopped the carriage before a large mansion.

But, of course, he could never say that out loud. Since Riddhe might be tired after his long journey, they had chosen to stay at the Sutherland mansion in Egdiel for a few days before heading back to Sheraford.

“Young master, it’s Albert. We are here at the mansion.”

“I know.”

Riddhe’s answer was immediate. He must not have napped in the carriage after all. His expression was sullen as he opened the door and stepped out.

“His Grace would like you to send him word to say that you have arrived at

the mansion,” Albert reminded.

“Of course I’ll do it. There’s something I need to tell him urgently, after all.”

Riddhe sounded annoyed, but then he suddenly stopped. Turning around, he gestured to the bags piled on the carriage with his thumb.

“There’s a small casket in there.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a souvenir. Drink it with the other servants.”

“Yes... Huh?!”

“That wine there. Take it.”

Riddhe had called it small, but the casket was big enough to hold drinks for everyone to enjoy their fill.

“Is it really all right?”

“It’s not expensive stuff. I already got better souvenirs for the family,” was his harsh reply. After a moment’s thought, Riddhe continued, “Listen up. Tell everyone that the souvenir is from me. Because a Sutherland and those who serve under him are always generous like that!”

With that, Riddhe turned and headed into the mansion.

What had come over Riddhe that he would buy souvenirs for his servants? Albert stood shocked until he spotted Riddhe’s expression. Dissatisfaction, and maybe some disappointment.

Before he knew it, Albert was calling out, “Thank you!!”

Riddhe stopped in his tracks. Even though he didn’t turn around, Albert still smiled brightly. “Everyone will surely be very happy... Welcome home, young master.”

“Y-You should have said that sooner! Idiot!” Riddhe snapped at him. His face was red before he stormed into the mansion. Left outside, Albert couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

Riddhe was arrogant, extremely proud, and difficult to serve in so many ways, but he was also kind to those close to him. Albert couldn’t find it in himself to

hate Riddhe, even with all his negative aspects.

After all, his young master was just a little troublesome, Albert thought with a chuckle.

Side Story: The Young Man Without a Goal

THE chandelier glittered brilliantly, spilling champagne-gold light onto the great hall. The members of Heiland's inspection squad sighed in awe at the sight of the empire's gentlemen and ladies dressed beautifully in the latest fashion.

And right in the middle of the ball was a bright star: Robert von Belt of the Heiland inspection squad.

"Are you really going back?"

"You can stay here in Erdal."

"I'm sure Her Imperial Majesty would want to have someone like Lord Robert by her side, too."

"Calm down, ladies."

Dressed smartly in his formal knight's uniform with his silver hair in a loose braid, Robert smiled. The ladies around him blushed. Taking one of them by the hand, he bestowed a light kiss on the back of it, causing the others to squeal.

"I will miss you all, but I am a knight, and I have sworn to protect my kingdom."

"Oh... That is so gallant of you, Lord Robert."

"Please, won't you come to see me again?"

"Hey! What about me?"

"I'd love to see you again, too."

"It's a promise," he said. "The next time I visit Erdal, I will get on one knee, take each of your hands in turn, and ask for a dance."

The ladies squealed again, and Robert took the chance to slip away and strutted down the hall. Every lady he passed came down with racing hearts and sparkling eyes. Despite that, he headed straight towards the balcony without

stopping, a friendly smile on his face the entire way.

Outside, a pleasant breeze caressed his face. He strained his eyes in the darkness and spotted the back of the one he was looking for. Before Robert could open his mouth to call out, the black-haired man leaning against the railing turned around, probably having heard his footsteps.

“You’re quite the life of the party.” Clovis already sounded exasperated.

“Oh, so you noticed?”

“I’d have to be blind not to.”

“Sorry about that. This has happened every night since we decided on our return date.”

“No need to act sad. Your face is giving away how much you’re enjoying it.”

“How rude. As a man, it’s only polite to feel at least a little joy when so many beautiful ladies look at you with such passion in their eyes. A true gentleman plays the role of a perfect man and makes their hearts flutter.”

Clovis shook his head as Robert shrugged.

“Seriously... We’re here on a mission on the order of His Majesty.”

“I’ve already fulfilled my duties as an inspection squad member. Besides, you attract all the ladies’ attention too.”

“I’m not like you,” Clovis retorted with a frown.

But Robert spoke the truth. Stiff and straitlaced he might be, unwilling to respond when a lady flirted with him, but Clovis was still popular. In fact, he was extremely popular.

Robert tilted his head to one side, wondering what the women saw in this man who seemed uninterested in the fairer sex. Perhaps his anti-social nature made him seem stoic and sexy. Women’s hearts were sometimes hard to understand.

But we’ve still become such good friends.

Leaning on the railing next to Clovis, Robert stole a glance at the other man.

Needless to say, the two were polar opposites. In contrast to Robert, who was

amiable and relaxed towards everyone, Clovis was always serious and found it hard to form close relationships with others.

Despite that, they'd discovered during their mission that they shared similar ideals regarding Heiland and politics, which meant they worked together often. Soon, Robert learned about the "family scandal" that had caused Clovis to withdraw from others and decided to break down his walls by constantly engaging with and pestering the man. Eventually, the two came to trust each other.

"Hey, Clovis. What will you do when we return to Heiland?"

Robert's pointed question had the expected effect, as Clovis's shoulders stiffened. After a moment, he swirled his glass lightly and gave a wry smile.

"Who knows? My original plan was to stay on at the academy and pursue a career as a scholar, but I've been out of the academic loop for two years now. Besides, I've learned so much during this inspection tour. It's probably not too late to change my mind and do something else."

"Oh, I knew you would give such a boring answer." Robert slapped his forehead with a hand and looked up at the sky. "All right, I agree that being a scholar is great, and you can work as a consultant in the castle, but that's a waste for someone like you. A loss for our kingdom. Do you understand?"

"You're exaggerating."

"Not at all. Who saw the reality of Erdal these past two years? Of course, the academy could use your brilliance, but you should use your talent for the sake of the kingdom."

Clovis frowned, but Robert noticed a light glinting deep in those amethyst eyes.

"That's right! How about becoming an adviser? It'll be perfect for you."

"You're being unrealistic again."

"No, it's the most realistic suggestion. Chief adviser Otto is famous for valuing ability more than lineage, so he'll surely want you. After all, your calm judgment is perfect for an adviser."

“An adviser, huh...”

“If you want to, just go for it.”

Robert looked calmly at Clovis as he wavered.

Clovis wanted to be involved in national affairs. However, his family scandal was never far from his mind, and it made him hesitate to step into the spotlight.

In the end, Clovis smiled and shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve already said too much in the report we submitted the other day.”

“You mean that report on social standing? If Lord Nigel reads it and dismisses it, then it tells us everything we need to know about him. If that happens, I’ll reluctantly give up my goal to become part of the Imperial Guard and move to protect the outskirts of the kingdom.”

“Then I will bury myself under a mountain of books. And maybe visit the outskirts sometimes to see you.”

“That’s a promise. You have to come; it’ll be so terribly boring out there,” Robert jested. He firmly believed that things would not turn out that way.

Since his appointment, Lord Otto worked to revamp the advisory office into a system based on meritocracy. Such a man would be impressed with Clovis’s report. In fact, he would surely call upon the both of them to have an audience with the king.

“Anyway, it looks like I’ll be stuck with you for a long time.”

“Agreed.”

Robert stuck out a fist, and Clovis did the same with a small chuckle. They bumped them together as Robert laughed.

He would not allow Clovis to throw away his future so easily.

It didn’t take long for Clovis and the princess with sky-blue eyes to meet after that.

Afterword

HELLO, my name is Roku. I want to thank everyone who has supported me since I started posting my stories on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. *Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess* was a novel serialization that was originally uploaded on the *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* website.

This work is packed full of my favorite tropes, such as a world set in the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era, an earnest and hardworking protagonist, a talented black-haired hero, themes of loyalty, conflict, ups and downs, a slow-developing romance, and so on. I stuffed all of that and more in here, so thinking up the plot and the actual act of writing the story were lots of fun.

I am really glad that the *Blue Rose Princess* story has taken the form of an official publication. This may be your first time reading it, or you may have already read it online. Either way, did you enjoy it? I hope that this story can resonate with everyone who reads it.

The continuation of the series is uploaded on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* in Japanese, under the genre *Isekai* (Another World) Romance. My apologies to those who are confused. No, I'm not lying. It really is a romance.

Honestly, I'm the author, and even I'm not sure which genre this story falls into. It's not really set in another world, and it doesn't have any magic to be labeled as fantasy, and there are no lovey-dovey scenes to classify it as romance (I'd love to. I'd so love to add it in, but she's only ten years old now, so...) That's where we are stuck for now.

However, it's thanks to all the readers of Alicia's "reprise" that this story has made it to publication.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has supported me on the site. I always read your comments and messages. I'm always wondering, "Will it be a spoiler if I reply with this?" or "Will it be rude if I use this tone or phrase?" so my replies always stayed on the safe side, but please know that I am always grateful for your messages, and my heart is always racing when I read them.

To Hazuki Futaba, who brought the story to life with her beautiful illustrations: thank you for giving my two protagonists such wonderful appearances. Alicia is energetic and so cute, while the protective Clovis looks so cool. When I saw the illustrations for the first time, I was so happy that I screamed.

To everyone who supported the publication: thank you so much for everything. If possible, I look forward to us working together again. I will do my best.

The story continues on. In order to change the future of the kingdom, the two protagonists will confront various “enemies.” I hope that you’ll enjoy the delicate relationship between Alicia and her adviser, Clovis, and how it will change over time.

Please continue to support the stories of Princess Alicia, who is given a “reprise” at life, and the adviser who supports her.

Kaname Roku

November 2017



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STORY BY: YUURI SEO
ILLUSTRATION BY: M/G
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

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cross infinite world



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